

**THE RAGTIME PIANO REVIVAL IN AMERICA:  
ITS ORIGINS, INSTITUTIONS, AND COMMUNITY, 1940-2015**

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University of Pittsburgh, 2016

Since the early 1940s, ragtime piano has been the focus of a musical revival community in the United States. Like many other music revival movements, what began as an effort by a dedicated few to revitalize and preserve a “vanishing” musical practice—in this case, one that had flourished from the mid-1890s to the mid-1910s—soon attracted ardent enthusiasts eager to collect, compose, and perform ragtime. They celebrated its historical roots while endeavoring to re-establish ragtime as a thriving tradition. This study, drawing on original archival research, interviews with ragtime community members, and the author’s twelve years as a participant-observer in the community, examines the origins and development of the American ragtime piano revival community.

Chapter 2 analyzes selected writings of the 1940s, in which the earliest revivalists sought to legitimize ragtime and forge an identity for the music distinct from jazz. Chapter 3 discusses three prominent ragtime serial publications that began in the 1960s (*The RagTime Review*, *The Ragtimer*, and *The Rag Times*), the people and organizations behind them, and the ways in which geographically disparate ragtime revivalists sought to



organize their efforts, generating a core ragtime community while debating notions of authenticity in ragtime performance. Chapters 4 and 5 examine two prominent annual ragtime events—The Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival and the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest—to discuss practices through which the ragtime community has maintained and expressed itself into the twenty-first century. The dissertation argues that as the revival community has established and maintained itself, it has witnessed a shift from product-oriented to process-oriented notions of authenticity, heralding the arrival of a “post-revival.”

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION: RAGTIME AND COMMUNITY

*Ragtime is not outmoded like the horse and buggy; it is not an artifact; it has the currency and continuity of a developing and irrepressible thing.*

RUDI BLESCH and HARRIET JANIS  
*They All Played Ragtime*<sup>1</sup>

*My home would have to be whatever I carried around inside me. And in so many ways, I think this is a terrific liberation. Because when my grandparents were born, they pretty much had their sense of home, their sense of community, even their sense of enmity, assigned to them at birth, and didn't have much chance of stepping outside of that. And nowadays, at least some of us can choose our sense of home, create our sense of community, fashion our sense of self, and in so doing maybe step a little beyond some of the black and white divisions of our grandparents' age.*

PICO IYER  
"Where Is Home?"<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in the late 1930s and continuing into the twenty-first century, piano ragtime music has been at the heart of a small, if vibrant musical revival movement that has reinvented itself several times to adapt to changing aesthetics, historical sensibilities, and audiences. From ragtime's "rediscovery" by a subset of the "traditional jazz" revivalists of the 1940s (many of whom approached the music as an historical curiosity—a mere stepping stone to jazz), to its commercial exploitation as a nostalgic antidote to atomic-era fears in the 1950s, the early stages of revival were tenuous and only loosely coordinated

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<sup>1</sup> Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They All Played Ragtime* (New York: Oak Publications, 1971), 270.

<sup>2</sup> Pico Iyer, "Where Is Home?" Filmed June 2013, TED video, 14:01, posted July 2013, [http://www.ted.com/talks/pico\\_ayer\\_where\\_is\\_home.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/pico_ayer_where_is_home.html).

among scattered enthusiasts. Not until the late 1950s and early 1960s were the seeds sown for a more lasting revival that sought to appreciate ragtime on its own terms (as a “serious” American art form), spawning a community of ragtime performers, composers, and enthusiasts that has persisted since, re-fashioning and championing ragtime as a “living tradition.”

In this study, I examine the ragtime revival community as a subset of contemporary culture—a cultural cohort<sup>3</sup>—in which common interests, experiences, and values contribute to both individual and collective identity. What started more than a half century ago through the efforts of a dedicated few who sought to revive and preserve a “forgotten” music has since become a self-reflexive community, cognizant not only of its relation to its parent tradition but also of its own history and achievements. The ragtime revival community is but one of many musical revival communities to have developed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, their presence challenging conventional notions of both “revival” and “community” within academia. As scholars in the 1980s and 1990s came to accept musical revival movements as “ethnographic realities and not imitations of the real thing,”<sup>4</sup> a sizable body of literature within musicology on “revival theory” emerged.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, a resurgence in the early 2000s and 2010s of scholarly interest in studying musical communities has led to the development of new frameworks

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 95.

<sup>4</sup> Tamara Livingston, “Music Revivals: Towards a General Theory,” *Ethnomusicology* 43, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 68.

<sup>5</sup> See especially the following: Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Music Revival* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2014); Amy Wooley, “Conjuring Utopia: The Appalachian String Band Revival” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2003); Livingston, “Music Revivals”; Neil V. Rosenberg, ed., *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined* (Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1993); Mark Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).

for defining and analyzing the social attachments and group affiliation produced through musical performance.<sup>6</sup> Borrowing from sociology, anthropology, and musicology, I explore the ways in which the ragtime revival community maintains itself as it continues to prompt new modes of expression in ragtime.

What I will refer to as the “ragtime era”—the period when ragtime flourished in the United States as a dominant form of popular music—occupied a span of roughly twenty years, from 1897 to 1917.<sup>7</sup> In the century since, “ragtime” has come to have different meanings and connotations for different people; today it may just as readily call to mind the illicit goings-on of a seedy St. Louis “sporting house” as the innocent pleasure of a frozen treat from a midsummer’s day ice cream truck. Having come of age at that critical junction in history that witnessed explosive growth in the popular music industry just as the United States itself was emerging as a global superpower, ragtime has had a complicated and checkered life of its own, richly layered with issues of race, gender, and moral and aesthetic codes (among others). It is not my goal or intention in this study to parse out the meanings assigned to ragtime in *fin-de-siècle* American society, except as they relate to those affecting the present revival community. Detailed, authoritative studies by Edward Berlin, John Edward Hasse, David Jasen, Bill Edwards, and others have already begun to analyze ragtime within the context of the early twentieth century, even if the door remains wide open for additional research and discussion. My purpose is to look at

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<sup>6</sup> Kay Kaufman Shelemay, “Musical Communities: Rethinking the Collective in Music,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 349-390.

<sup>7</sup> The year 1897 marked the first sheet music publication of instrumental works designated “Rag” in the title, including early entries “Mississippi Rag” by William H. Krell, “Louisiana Rag” by Theodore Northrup, and “Harlem Rag” by Tom Turpin. 1917 witnessed the death of Scott Joplin and the release of what are widely recognized as the first jazz recordings.

the ragtime revival community as it has developed since the early 1940s and as it exists today, responding in part to Kay Kaufman Shelemay's 2011 call for more "community" studies within musicology.<sup>8</sup>

A century after ragtime's heyday, there are no surviving members of the ragtime community who can claim an affinity for the music based on nostalgic first-hand memories of having lived when the music was new. People are attracted to ragtime and enter the community for a variety of reasons and in many different ways. In talking with other members of the ragtime community (both casually and in structured interviews), I have learned that the story of my own introduction to the music and subsequent entry to the community is fairly typical of many, so it seems fitting to begin with a brief discussion of what initially attracted my interest.

## 1.1 MY INTRODUCTION TO RAGTIME

Just as it has with many others, ragtime found *me*. I did not grow up with it. I did not go looking for it. I did not wake up one morning sensing a gaping musical void in my life in need of filling. I certainly did not go out in search of a "dying" music to revive and preserve. I was quite satisfied and content in my little musical world (then consisting primarily of classical music and rock 'n' roll "oldies" of the 1950s and early '60s) when

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<sup>8</sup> Shelemay, "Musical Communities."

ragtime found me through happy circumstance: by chance I heard it, I liked it, and then I wanted to hear more.

It happened when I was about ten years old. I was a frustrated classical piano student growing weary of playing “polite” little sonatinas and études that, for all their pleasantries, didn’t provide the energy or excitement I craved in music. At an elementary school talent show, after I had played something from one of my Suzuki method books, another student played an arrangement of Scott Joplin’s “The Entertainer.” I listened transfixed: to my ears, the strong rhythmic pulse coupled with a memorable, singable, syncopated melody reminded me of the early rock ‘n’ roll records I so loved, and yet the music retained something of the sensitivity and polished elegance I was learning in my weekly piano lessons. Here was a style of piano playing that fused the elements I found most appealing from the realms of classical and popular music. Shortly afterwards, in my father’s modest record collection, I found two Nonesuch records of Scott Joplin’s rags played by Joshua Rifkin. My father copied them to tape for me (he would never let me touch his vinyl) and the cassette quickly became a favorite of mine. I found and read a Joplin biography in my school’s library. The librarian, sensing my interest, soon put into heavy rotation CDs of Joplin rags on the library boombox that otherwise played a seemingly endless stream of quiet, innocuous classical music. With the discovery of names like Max Morath and Richard Zimmerman, I was soon spending my weekly allowance on whatever ragtime-related records I could find in the local used record store I frequented. With the reluctant consent of my piano teacher, I began working in a few simplified Joplin rags among the requisite Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin, graduating to

Joplin's original published scores as soon as my hands were large enough to cover the octave spans in both hands. By the time I finished high school, ragtime had become the center of my musical life and would soon come to dominate and direct other components of my life as well, including my ultimate pursuit of a career in musicology.

Within weeks of beginning classes as an undergraduate at the College of William and Mary in 2001, I met a fellow pianist, Robert Schwieger, who shared my growing passion for ragtime. By chance we happened to be in the school's piano practice rooms at the same time and overheard each other playing Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag." Despite a host of personal differences (ranging from academic interests to dietary preferences to political views) that would have made our friendship unlikely under ordinary circumstances, our mutual musical passion brought us together as close friends and eventual roommates for our junior and senior years. In a prescient microcosm of the ragtime community I did not yet know existed, the attachment each of us felt to a music far outside the cultural mainstream represented a significant enough marker of our individual identities that it was able to override all other affiliations. In addition to the many non-musical experiences friends often share, music continued to mediate our friendship: we organized on-campus ragtime concerts together, hosted a weekly ragtime radio program on the college's radio station, and performed together at schools and retirement communities in the Williamsburg, Virginia area. In the late spring of 2003, having learned via Internet about an international ragtime-oriented piano competition, we traveled together to compete at the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest in Peoria, Illinois. It was my first major ragtime "event," and the experience introduced me to the small but thriving



revival community of several hundred ragtime performers, composers, researchers, and enthusiasts.

The Peoria contest afforded me the first significant opportunity to connect in person with dozens of others who shared my peculiar musical interests. While the audience—as I had expected—could charitably be described as being of retirement age or older (while judges tallied scores between rounds, an audience “contest” by show of hands determined the oldest person in attendance to be 96 years of age), I was startled to find that the contestants were generally younger: most between 15 and 50 years of age. Although it was a contest with the title “World Champion” and a modest sum of money at stake, I was impressed by the congeniality and camaraderie I witnessed over the three-day event, and before it was over, I was overwhelmed by the sense of belonging I felt. It was obvious that many of the others attended the contest every year, and, like my friendship with Rob, they clearly had developed meaningful connections with each other that existed beyond the realm of the contest in the “real world.” I soon learned that those friendships and contacts were maintained throughout the year by a series of ragtime festivals, events, and regular interpersonal communication (by phone, mail, e-mail, and in-person visits). My new friends encouraged me to attend and perform at other ragtime events, and at the dozens of ragtime festivals, contests, and gatherings I attended in the years that followed, I became increasingly involved with this close-knit group of self-proclaimed “ragtimers” who challenged much of what I thought I knew about the music and the people who made and continue to make it.

What I originally perceived as an “historical” music firmly rooted in the trappings of American culture at the dawn of the twentieth century, I soon came to understand as a “living tradition” at the heart of an active revival community that celebrates the music’s past while seeking to foster a future in which ragtime is more than “museum music.”<sup>9</sup> From the efforts of a few dozen devoted ragtimers in the early 1960s, the first self-conscious “ragtime revival community” emerged. Many more have joined its ranks since, and the early revival has given way to a revitalization movement supported by a multi-generational core community. Unsurprisingly, changes in the makeup of the ragtime community have had and continue to have profound effects on various aspects of ragtime “musicking” (to borrow Christopher Small’s term).

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<sup>9</sup> “Museum music” is a disparaging term I have encountered frequently in the ragtime community, especially among younger performers and composers seemingly eager to dispel the notion that they seek only to imitate or recreate the past.

## 1.2 WHAT IS RAGTIME?

*Ragtime is one of the first truly American musics, and it is not quite like any other American style. It is a music of toe-tapping vitality, yet often of fragile beauty and subtle rhythmic complexity. Though based on orthodox harmonies, ragtime is never fully predictable. It has an immediate and direct appeal. Its charm and allure transcend the time and place of the Ragtime Era. Ragtime is a music of diversity within similarity, of expressivity within a set of conventions, of apparent simplicity but often real complexity, of seeming ease of performance but actual difficulty.*

JOHN EDWARD HASSE<sup>10</sup>

“Ragtime,” as with any term that attempts to encapsulate under a single header such a diverse range of styles, musicians, composers, time periods, performance contexts, and connotations, has long defied easy definition. In the early twentieth century, the word was often a catch-all for any popular music. In contemporary usage, the term has come to refer to a musical style, a genre and its associated repertoire, a style of dance, and a time period. Most definitions tend to focus on structural dimensions of the music while others consider historical and affective qualities as well. One of my primary objectives in this dissertation is to tease out what ragtime *means* to the community that identifies so fiercely with it. Before doing that, however, it will be helpful to highlight some of the main features and basic elements of ragtime that are common knowledge in the ragtime community: the foundation on which all understanding of ragtime is built. I will turn to a brief discussion of ragtime’s history in the next chapter and will concern myself primarily with the music’s stylistic characteristics here.

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<sup>10</sup> John Edward Hasse, “Ragtime: From the Top,” in *Ragtime, Its History, Composers, and Music*, ed. John Edward Hasse (New York: Schirmer, 1985), 1.

In essence, ragtime is identified by a prominently syncopated melody, usually juxtaposed against a steady, generally non-syncopated accompaniment in duple meter (2/4 or 4/4). On piano, the instrument most often associated with ragtime, this generally manifests itself in a right-hand melody over a left-hand accompaniment that alternates between low octaves or single notes on “strong” beats (1 and 3) and mid-range chords on “weak” beats (2 and 4). For rhythmic variety, the left hand pattern may be periodically interrupted with its own syncopations, octave “runs,” or successive mid-range chords; however, it is the generally strict, march-like rhythm of the accompaniment contrasted with the melody’s frequent syncopated accenting of “weak” beats that gives ragtime its characteristic lilt.

John Edward Hasse identifies four main types of ragtime: instrumental rags, ragtime songs, ragtime or syncopated waltzes, and “ragged” versions of classics or other preexisting pieces.<sup>11</sup> The repertoire of published ragtime is vast: David Jasen and Gene Jones provide an extensive listing of 2,002 rags published from the 1890s through the 1960s,<sup>12</sup> though Hasse estimates as many as 3,000 instrumental ragtime works may have been published in the “ragtime era” alone in addition to a like number of ragtime songs.<sup>13</sup> With the advent of desktop self-publishing and print-on-demand technology, it has become nearly impossible to systematically track all ragtime compositions, but Michael Mathew’s *Ragtime Compendium* contains what is probably the most comprehensive

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> David A. Jasen and Gene Jones, *That American Rag: The Story of Ragtime From Coast to Coast* (New York: Schirmer, 2000), 343-405.

<sup>13</sup> Hasse, “Ragtime: From the Top,” 4.

listing of ragtime compositions ever assembled, logging 16,754 works as of its most recent update (31 May 2015).<sup>14</sup>

Many instrumental rags borrow from the harmonic and structural conventions of earlier duple-meter dances such as the two-step, polka, schottische, and march, having three or four distinct 16-measure strains (themes) and generally observing conventional tonal harmony. In print, common patterns for arranging the strains include AABBACCDD, AABBCDD, ABBACC, and ABBCCA, often as part of a larger binary form in which the A and B strains may be thematically linked and in the tonic key, while the C and D sections (usually in a complementary key) operate as an independent *trio*.<sup>15</sup> While their order is seldom rearranged, in performance, strains may be omitted or repeated, frequently with added embellishments. Four-bar introductions are common before the A section; four or eight-bar codas following the final strain, however, are rare but not unknown. Most rags are in a major mode, with “flat keys” generally preferred. C, F, B-flat, E-flat, and A-flat are especially common keys. Rags in minor keys typically modulate to a major key by the final strain.

Ragtime adapts well to many instruments, and a cursory search of YouTube in 2015 reveals people playing ragtime on instruments ranging from harp to shamisen to

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Mathew, *A Ragtime Compendium*, accessed 2 October 2015, <http://ragtimecompendium.tripod.com>.

<sup>15</sup> From the seventeenth century onwards, the term “trio” came to identify the second of two alternating dances (the second typically scored for only three voices). To provide variety in texture and sonority, the trio is often in a different key and draws upon different thematic material. In ragtime, the AB and CD pairings often operate independently enough that they may be excerpted in performance to form standalone pieces. Though not explicitly a rag, Scott Joplin’s “Solace—A Mexican Serenade” follows the customary ABBACCDD rag form. In performance, the entire first half is sometimes omitted, as in Marvin Hamlisch’s performance on the soundtrack for the film *The Sting* (1973). Similarly, Joplin’s “The Entertainer” is often heard in truncated form, with the C and D strains omitted.

electric guitar to tuba to marimba to a set of tuned beer bottles.<sup>16</sup> The clear division of melody, countermelody, and accompaniment in many rags lends itself to various ensemble and orchestral settings, and from its beginnings, ragtime has often been as much a music for group as solo performance. Solo instruments strongly associated with ragtime include the banjo, guitar, accordion, xylophone, and, most notably, the piano.

While ensemble ragtime performances generally rely on pre-arranged scores with little room for individual improvisation, much of piano ragtime lies in the fascinating nexus of aural and literate musical traditions. Published scores remain the authoritative texts for most rags (whether old or new), but improvisation has long been common in ragtime piano performance. The degree of improvisation realized in performance varies greatly from one musician to another according to his or her intentions and abilities, but unlike even early forms of jazz where improvisation may involve a dramatic re-working of the melody, improvisation in ragtime is usually limited to rhythmic substitutions or the insertion of ornaments, embellishments, or “tricks,” with a recognizable form of the original melody left intact.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> These are only examples chosen at random from among an almost limitless variety.

<sup>17</sup> “Tricks” are rhythmic and/or melodic patterns that may be used to embellish or fill in musical space, often at times of little or no harmonic motion. The same “trick” may be deployed in a variety of settings, and a musician’s repertoire of these patterns is often referred to as his or her “bag of tricks.” An example of a “trick” might be a downward cascading pattern of alternating fifths and sixths starting near the top of the keyboard and played by the right hand in rapid succession at a time when the melody might otherwise feature a rest or long sustained note in the midrange.

### 1.2.1 Etymology of “ragtime”

The etymology of the word “ragtime” remains a point of contention among scholars and those within the ragtime community. Edward Berlin, in the *Grove Music Online* entry for ragtime, eschews discussion of the term’s origins, noting only that it coalesced sometime during or shortly after the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the most widespread and commonly-accepted theory is that the term is short for “ragged time,” since to “rag” a tune is to play it in a syncopated style.<sup>19</sup> Hasse, as well as Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis cite novelist George W. Cable’s 1886 description of the syncopated rhythm of a black dance in New Orleans’s Congo Square as “ragged.”<sup>20</sup> While Cable was not witnessing or describing ragtime *per se*, he provides a musical transcription that bears striking rhythmic resemblance to several rags published a dozen years later, lending some credence to the “rag” in ragtime referring to the music’s syncopated rhythms. Cable’s use of “ragged” to suggest syncopation, however, may not have been typical in his time, as few if any other sources from so early have been documented which use the word in a similar way. On the other hand, none other than Scott Joplin himself

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<sup>18</sup> *Grove Music Online*, s.v. “Ragtime,” by Edward A. Berlin, accessed 12 August 2013, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/subscriber/article/grove/music/22825>.

<sup>19</sup> Terry Waldo, *This Is Ragtime* (New York: Hawthorne, 1976), 4.

<sup>20</sup> George W. Cable, “The Dance in Place Congo,” *The Century* 31, no. 4 (February 1886): 525. Of a performance of the creole song “Voyez ce mullet la” (“Look at that darky there”), Cable writes that “[t]he rhythm stretches out heathenish and ragged.” Cable provides a transcription of the piece, arranged by musicologist Henry Edward Krehbiel (though Hasse erroneously attributes it to Cable himself). Hasse makes the curious claim that the example “does not reveal ragtime rhythms.” The piano part is clearly meant to evoke a banjo, and I would argue that the piano’s alternating bass notes (in octaves) and midrange broken chords bear a remarkable resemblance to piano ragtime’s left hand conventions. Meanwhile, “Voyez ce mullet la”’s melody is heavily syncopated, returning often to a rhythmic pattern of sixteenth-eighth-sixteenth-eighth-eighth that features prominently in early published ragtime compositions such as Max Hoffman’s “Rag Medley” (1897) and W. C. O’Hare’s “Levee Revels” (1898).

supported the theory; when asked by an interviewer “Why do you call it ragtime?”, Joplin responded “Oh! because it has such a ragged movement. It suggests something like that.”<sup>21</sup>

A competing theory, not without merit, was espoused by Anne Danberg Charters in a 1961 article in *Ethnomusicology*. Charters notes that the earliest pianists to play ragtime were primarily black (with a few white) itinerant musicians—often exceptionally skilled—who drifted from town-to-town in the American Midwest, following the crowds to fairs, races, and other amusements, and performing where they could. Their repertoire would likely have consisted of well-known popular songs, folk tunes, and themes from classical music and opera, played in a jaunty and highly personal style. In back-rooms after an evening’s work, musical ideas “were exchanged freely and ‘rags’ were patched together from bits of melody and scraps of harmony that all contributed.”<sup>22</sup> In this theory, “rag” has more to do with the patchwork structure of early ragtime than with rhythmic descriptions. Indeed, a number of early published “rags” such as Frank X. McFadden’s “Rags to Burn” (1899) and Max Hoffman’s “Rag Medley” (1897) are medleys of popular tunes or folk melodies; for the sheet music cover of Hoffman’s work, even the letters of the title are cleverly formed from tattered cloth rags hanging on a clothesline. Others, such as Scott Joplin’s first published ragtime composition, “Original Rags” (1899), tellingly use the plural form to suggest a patchwork medley.

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<sup>21</sup> “Scott-Joplin,” *American Musician and Art Journal* 23/24, 13 December 1907, 5. Quoted in Edward A. Berlin, *King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 45.

<sup>22</sup> A. R. Danberg Charters, “Negro Folk Elements in Classic Ragtime,” *Ethnomusicology* 5, no. 3 (September 1961): 174.



More recent research by Ed Berlin, Lynn Abbott, Doug Seroff, Fred Hoeptner, and Bill Edwards has provided possibly the most convincing explanation for ragtime's etymological origins, having to do with African-American dance styles and social functions in the late nineteenth century. By 1897, when Ben Harney's *Rag-Time Instructor* reported that it was synonymous with "Negro Dance Time," the word "ragtime" (or "rag") had already been in use for a decade or more to describe a kind of lively dance and the social affairs—sometimes integrated—where such dancing took place.<sup>23</sup> Notable ragtime publisher John Stark wrote in a 1901 letter to the editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* that "[t]he word 'rag' was long ago applied to a dance, a regular double-shuffle, pigeon-wing, hoe-down. To music or to patting. It was long afterward applied to the music used for such dancing—especially when much syncopated and now syncopations are the distinguishing characteristics of ragtime."<sup>24</sup> Meaning a "social function, sometimes integrated, at which black string bands provided music for dancing," Abbott and Seroff trace the word "rag" to as early as 1891.<sup>25</sup> Hoeptner traces it earlier still: to an 1881 article in the *Kansas City Star* which describes a grand reception for newly-installed Missouri governor Thomas Crittenden as "Crittenden's Rag."<sup>26</sup> The breezy, informal nature of the

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<sup>23</sup> Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music, 1889-1895* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2002), 443. Abbott and Seroff acknowledge Blesh and Janis's quotation from an 1899 article by Rupert Hughes, who writes "Negroes call their clog dancing 'ragging' and the dance a 'rag,' a dance largely shuffling. The dance is a sort of frenzy with frequent yelps of delight from the dancer and spectators and accompanied by the latter with hand clapping and stomping of feet." From "A Eulogy of Ragtime," *Musical Record*, 1 April 1899. Quoted in Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They All Played Ragtime* (New York: Oak Publications, 1971), 103.

<sup>24</sup> John Stark, "Ragtime" in "Letters From the People," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 12 November 1901, 6. I am grateful to Bill Edwards for bringing this article to my attention.

<sup>25</sup> Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, 443.

<sup>26</sup> Fred Hoeptner, "Crittenden's Rag," *American Music Review* 40, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 11. Hoeptner bases his article on a newspaper column also titled "Crittenden's Rag" which appeared in the 4 February 1881 edition of the *Kansas City Star*.

original *Star* article and the fact that the author makes no attempt to elaborate or explain the usage of “rag” leads Hoeptner to hypothesize that even in 1881, “rag” must have already been in the vernacular to describe a joyous social affair. It does not seem much of a leap, then, to suppose that by the century’s end, “rag” and “ragtime” had come to refer not only to a style of dance or a social event, but to the music that undoubtedly accompanied them as well.

More colorful theories abound, many told among members of the community more for amusement, it would seem, than for historical credibility. Take, for example, one that begins by stating that the music in its earliest years was heard chiefly in brothels as accompaniment to the houses’ primary “entertainment.” By some accounts, “on the rag” was a common euphemism then—as it is now—for a woman’s monthly period.<sup>27</sup> Because of a phenomenon of menstrual synchrony among the prostitutes, a whole brothel may be otherwise “out of commission” for up to a whole week each month. On those occasions, the house pianist or other musicians would become the primary draw, keeping customers entertained with music during the “rag times.”

With no general consensus, proponents for these four theories and others can be found among members of the ragtime community. The origin of the term “ragtime” continues to provide a topic for seemingly endless debate.

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<sup>27</sup> I could find no explicit reference to the phrase “on the rag” from the late nineteenth century, though anecdotal evidence posted to an online forum suggests that the phrase was already in common usage by the 1920s. See “Why ‘On the Rag’ Means Menstruation,” Museum of Menstruation and Women’s Health, accessed 17 August 2013, <http://www.mum.org/olnews43.htm>. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the expression only as far back as 1967. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Rag,” accessed 5 April 2016, <http://www.oed.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/157419?redirectedFrom=on+the+rag#eid117889473>.

### 1.3 COMMUNITY THEORY

If the ragtime revival represents a “tradition transformed,” so too is current musical scholarship witnessing the transformation of one of its own traditions. Perhaps in response to Alexis de Tocqueville’s famous commentary on the tendency of Americans to form “little societies,”<sup>28</sup> discussions of “community” permeated academic studies not only in music but other humanities and social science disciplines as well for much of the twentieth century, only to recede somewhat in the 1980s and 1990s. Some scholars argued against the term on semantic grounds, claiming that its ubiquitous use and misuse had rendered it nearly meaningless. Robert Gardner likened “community” to “art” or “pornography,” noting that while easily recognizable, the term had become too variously defined.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, Richard Weaver observed its frequent use as a “charismatic term,”<sup>30</sup> to which Miranda Joseph added that “[c]arrying only positive connotations—a sense of belonging, understanding, caring, cooperation, equality—‘community’ is deployed to mobilize support not only for a huge variety of causes but also for the speaker using the term.”<sup>31</sup> From a more philosophical viewpoint, others—primarily sociologists promoting declensionist narratives—questioned the concept’s continuing verisimilitude, claiming

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<sup>28</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Abridged), ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), 281.

<sup>29</sup> Robert Gardner, “The Portable Community: Mobility and Modernization in Bluegrass Festival Life,” *Symbolic Interaction* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 156.

<sup>30</sup> Richard M. Weaver, *Language is Sermonic*, ed. Richard L. Johannesen, Rennard Strickland, and Ralph T. Eubanks (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970).

<sup>31</sup> Miranda Joseph, “Community,” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University, 2007), 57.

witness to a “breakdown of community” in the latter half of the twentieth century, perhaps endemic of the much feared cultural “gray-out.”<sup>32</sup>

Against the pessimistic tide, Robert D. Putnam reminds us that debates about the waxing and waning of community have persisted for “at least two centuries,” and he suggests that community bonds have not necessarily weakened, but that they now manifest themselves in new ways.<sup>33</sup> Such new forms of group affiliation are, according to sociologist Robert Wuthnow, “redefining community in a more fluid way,” leading to a “quiet revolution” in American society.<sup>34</sup> And what of the terminology? Despite the efforts of numerous scholars within musicology alone to supplant “community” with seemingly less baggage-laden analogues, Kay Kaufman Shelemay cautions that reliance on specialized terms risks alienating musicologists from other disciplines and those outside scholarly circles, and she advocates redefining “community” rather than jettisoning it, to better facilitate an interdisciplinary conversation that “does not require translation.”<sup>35</sup>

When I initially proposed to study the “ragtime community,” I was asked if such a community even exists. Does a collective of performers, composers, and enthusiasts grouped around a shared musical interest constitute a community? As Amy Wooley points out, “there must be more to a community than a shared affinity for something, or even a shared set of core beliefs.”<sup>36</sup> After all, the collectives formed around such diverse interests

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<sup>32</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 25.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>35</sup> Shelemay, “Musical Communities,” 350.

<sup>36</sup> Amy Wooley, “Conjuring Utopia: The Appalachian String Band Revival” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2003), 145.

and activities as golf, *Star Wars*, political parties, or even a particular profession do not necessarily constitute “communities.”

Obviously, confirming or refuting the presence of “community” would require a generally agreed upon definition of the term as well as some yardstick by which to “measure up.” In the following section, I will discuss several definitions and approaches to the concept of community and outline the parameters for my own use of the term in this study.

### **1.3.1 Definitions and historical perspectives of “community”**

The word “community” has its roots in the Anglo-Norman and Middle French words *communité* and *comunité* referring to joint ownership of something.<sup>37</sup> While the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s initial entry specifies only “a body of people or things viewed collectively,” it notes the usage of the word as early as the mid-eighteenth century to refer to a “group of people who share the same interests, pursuits, or occupation, esp. when distinct from those of the society in which they live.”<sup>38</sup> This secondary definition will serve as the basis for my approach to community, and it highlights an interesting, almost paradoxical dichotomy inherent in the term: “community” is defined by its ability to simultaneously bind and divide. A community is marked by something (or things) that its members have in common and that provides them with an essential component of their

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<sup>37</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Community,” accessed 10 September 2012, <http://www.oed.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/373337?redirectedFrom=community>.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

identity, but which also functions as a “boundary,” marking the community and its members as somehow distinct from larger society.

Thomas Turino, in treating communities as “ongoing dialectical interactions between individuals and their social and physical surroundings” approaches a critical component of communities otherwise absent from the preceding *OED* definition: the cultivation of what L. J. Hanifan terms “social capital.” Social capital refers to the “goodwill, fellowship, mutual sympathy and social intercourse among a group of individuals and families who make up a social unit.”<sup>39</sup> Like physical capital (e.g., money or objects), or cultural capital (e.g., education), social capital provides a means of measuring—albeit less quantifiably—the potential for affecting change. Just as an individual cannot start a business without at least some physical capital, Hanifan supposes that an “individual is helpless socially, if left entirely to himself [i.e., with no social capital].”<sup>40</sup> Through person-to-person interactions and the construction of social networks, individuals and communities accumulate social capital, which may correspond to an overall improvement of the community.

Early definitions of “community” seem to tacitly accept as inevitable the building of social capital. If, as Michael Strangelove observes, “[c]ommunication is the basis, the foundation, the radical ground and root upon which all community stands, grows, and thrives,” it is understandable that before the so-called “Information Age,” modes of communication virtually ensured community formation along geographic lines by necessitating more direct person-to-person contact. Living and working in close proximity,

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<sup>39</sup> Lyda Judson Hanifan, “The Rural School Community Center,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 67 (September 1916): 130.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

community members could be presumed to interact on a regular basis, building social capital. Rapid development of communication technologies in the twentieth century, however, has provided the ground in which new forms of “community” have taken root—forms in which the capacity to build social capital is not always apparent, contributing at least partially to community’s current “identity crisis.”<sup>41</sup>

In the wake of pioneering work by German sociologists Ferdinand Tönnies and Georg Simmel, for much of the twentieth century, “community” took on an overbearing association with “place”—a pairing that seems increasingly out of place in the more technologically-mediated society of the twenty-first century. As modes of human interaction are increasingly free of physical and geographical constraints, we must address and reconsider the essence of “community” (keeping in mind the importance of social capital), recasting the term to reflect the ways in which people experience it.

Much has been written since the 1990s about the rise of “virtual communities”—collectives formed and maintained primarily over the Internet. As early as 1891, a writer in *The Electrical Engineer* made the oxymoronic prediction that the telephone would bring about an “epoch of neighborhood without propinquity.”<sup>42</sup> While the telephone itself may not have given birth to new communities (quoting Martin Mayer, Putnam suggests that it instead served to reinforce existing ones),<sup>43</sup> the internet—and to some extent other

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<sup>41</sup> Of course, propinquity alone does not guarantee the growth of social capital; communication remains a critical component as well. Hanifan’s 1916 study cited above of rural West Virginia districts examined the links between community, communication, and social capital, demonstrating that among residents within a limited geographic area otherwise devoid of social capital, improved personal communication among parents, teachers, and students strengthened local community bonds and also generated the social capital that in turn improved markedly the quality and effectiveness of the educational system.

<sup>42</sup> “The Patent Centennial Celebration,” *The Electrical Engineer* (15 April 1891), 455.

<sup>43</sup> Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 168.

technologies such as sound and video recordings, radio, television, and even copy machines—have made possible such inexpensive and widely-accessible communication that they have enabled the formation of the so-called “virtual communities.” Appendage of the word “virtual” distinguishes these new forms of community; existing as they do only through technologically mediated channels of communication, they do not have the apparent immediacy or intimacy of face-to-face “traditional” communities. As technological refinements such as high quality video conferencing and ubiquitous smartphones running Facebook have made the flow of communication more fluid and “natural,” in these virtual communities, the true test of whether they become “real” communities lies in their ability to cultivate social capital—a difficult, but not insurmountable, task.<sup>44</sup>

Still, the widespread modern understanding of “community” is largely a twentieth-century construct bearing the stamp of Tönnies and Simmel, both of whom were keen to assess the term’s meaning and structural implications in the wake of the nineteenth-century shift towards larger and more complex industrial societies.<sup>45</sup> A detailed discussion of historical approaches to the concept of “community” is outside the scope of this study, but I believe a brief summary of the approaches taken by Tönnies, Simmel, and several other key thinkers since the late nineteenth century will better situate my own approach.

Tönnies and Simmel, in their studies of community and “group formation,” were largely concerned with interpreting concepts of commonality and difference in terms of

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<sup>44</sup> Putnam explores the challenges faced by internet “virtual” communities.

<sup>45</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 75.



concrete structures, Simmel even going so far as to ascribe geometric shapes to them.<sup>46</sup> Tönnies, in coining and contrasting the terms *gemeinschaft* (community) and *gesellschaft* (society) delineated the two theoretical structures based on an individual's orientation to the larger group: *gemeinschaft* indicating a "close" relationship based on kinship or shared mores in which individuals often submit to the interests of the larger group (what Talcott Parsons refers to as a "community of fate"),<sup>47</sup> and *gesellschaft* describing a somewhat looser relationship in which individuals act primarily out of their own self-interest while collectively shaping the identity of the whole. Simmel's more nuanced approach recognizes a spectrum of group structures based not only on "traditional" factors such as kinship and propinquity, but those stemming from religious beliefs, gender, economic and personal interests, and other factors as well.<sup>48</sup> In expanding the scope of his study to include social groups that one enters as a matter of choice, Simmel argues that participation in such groups "will make it possible for the individual to make his beliefs and desires felt,"<sup>49</sup> and thus, individuals can be defined by their participation in and across multiple groups.

Following Tönnies and Simmel, Robert Redfield takes a structuralist approach, outlining a streamlined four-part checklist for "community." Chief among Redfield's criteria is a quality of distinctiveness: something apparent to outsider and insider alike that marks a community as somehow "different." Redfield also requires that a community be

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<sup>46</sup> Bernice A. Pescosolido and Beth A. Rubin, "The Web of Group Affiliations Revisited: Social Life, Postmodernism, and Sociology," *American Sociological Review* 65, no. 1 (February 2000): 53.

<sup>47</sup> Talcott Parsons, 687-689.

<sup>48</sup> Georg Simmel, *Conflict and The Web of Group-Affiliations*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff and Reinhard Bendix (New York: Free Press, 1966).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

“small,” consisting of no more than a few thousand people. Other requirements include a level of homogeneity in which members share activities and “states of mind” so that the community becomes “slow-changing,” and finally, a sense of self-sufficiency and permanence in which the community satisfies all or most needs of its members for life.<sup>50</sup> Redfield admits that not all communities will exhibit these characteristics to the same degree, but he nevertheless remains firmly rooted in an approach predicated upon observable physical characteristics coupled with the problematic assumption that people within a community can be counted upon to have a more-or-less homogenous mindset, a contentious point that has paved the way for newer approaches to community, most notably Anthony P. Cohen’s symbol-oriented approach.

Sociologist and anthropologist Cohen approaches community not a structure, but as a shared mode of experience with special meaning to the people who consider themselves part of it:

Community is that entity to which one belongs, greater than kinship but more immediately than the abstraction we call ‘society.’ It is the arena in which people acquire their most fundamental and most substantial experience of social life outside the confines of the home... [it] is where one learns and continues to practice how to ‘be social.’<sup>51</sup>

Despite the physically suggestive wording (community as an “arena... outside the confines of the home”), Cohen understands community to be a mental construct—in essence a shared sense of similarity among members who also recognize common boundaries that distinguish them from the world around them. But rather than seek physical or structural manifestations of unification or demarcation that might lead us to ask “what does

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<sup>50</sup> Robert Redfield, *The Little Community: Viewpoints for the Study of a Human Whole* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 4.

<sup>51</sup> Cohen, *Symbolic Construction of Community*, 15.

community look like?," Cohen urges us to ask instead "what does it appear to mean to its members?," for "[T]he reality of community lies in its members' perception of the vitality of its culture. People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity."<sup>52</sup> Borrowing from Clifford Geertz's concept of culture as "webs of significance," Cohen interprets community as something that is created and continually recreated according to shared mental constructs (i.e., symbols) that enable people to make meanings for themselves and in turn express what the community means to them.<sup>53</sup> Cohen's model provides an effective means for analysis because it does not approach community as a simple integrating mechanism in which members are treated as a monolithic mass subservient to a shared way of thinking, feeling, or believing; rather, the model considers community to be more of an aggregating device in which members project their own identities and values onto the community through shared symbols. Community is thus a symbolically constructed system of values, norms, and moral codes that enable members of a bounded whole to fashion an identity for themselves separate from the rest of society.

Because symbols must be interpreted at the individual level, in community, commonality need not lead to uniformity since members' understandings of shared symbols are shaped by their own idiosyncratic experiences. As the memberships of ragtime and other twenty-first century musical communities become less geographically restricted and increasingly diverse according to a host of criteria, models of "community" must include a flexible framework that respects the independent agency of individuals

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 19.

within a community. As Dorothea Hast has noted, participants in groups built around expressive culture will construct their own meanings of “community” at the individual level. “The continuous interplay between individual experience and group interaction,” she writes, “represents a complex cultural microcosm empowered by many voices.”<sup>54</sup>

### 1.3.2 Alternatives to “community”

Since the 1980s, a number of scholars have proposed to dispense with the term “community” altogether, or at least supplement it with newer modifiers and analogues. In some cases, they argue that “community” has become too variously defined to remain meaningful and useful; in others, too politicized as a tool for emotional and ideological manipulation. Some, like Ruth Finnegan, found that it simply was not appropriate or applicable to the collectives they studied. Within musicology alone, proposed alternatives include Thomas Turino’s “cultural cohorts,”<sup>55</sup> Dick Hebdige<sup>56</sup> and Mark Slobin’s “subcultures,”<sup>57</sup> Ruth Finnegan’s “pathways,”<sup>58</sup> and Will Straw’s “music scenes.”<sup>59</sup> For the purposes of my study, many such stand-ins for “community” are either unwieldy, fraught with their own complications of meaning, or simply do not convey the same impact as “community” (complete with all its baggage). In the paragraphs that follow, I will consider

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<sup>54</sup> Dorothea Hast, “Music, Dance, and Community: Contra Dance in New England” (PhD diss., Wesleyan University, 1994), 91.

<sup>55</sup> Turino, *Music as Social Life*, 187.

<sup>56</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979).

<sup>57</sup> Mark Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).

<sup>58</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007).

<sup>59</sup> Will Straw, “Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Scenes and Communities in Popular Music,” *Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (October 1991): 373.

several of the proposed alternatives and briefly discuss my reasons for not adopting them.<sup>60</sup>

In his 1979 monograph *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige was primarily concerned with youth collectives in the United Kingdom, especially as they organized themselves against the cultural mainstream. In describing groups such as Teddy Boys, skinheads, and punks as “subcultures,” Hebdige sought a model and terminology in which he could analyze the meanings assigned to their conventions of dress, behavior, language, and other modes of expression (such as music and dance). For Hebdige, defining characteristics of the various “subcultures” he investigated included origins in British working-class youth and, perhaps more importantly, an overtly rebellious ideology directed against dominant cultural norms. Perhaps because such subcultures provide fertile ground for discussing a host of political and social issues, Shelemay has noted that such “subaltern communities” have enjoyed “a place of privilege” in ethnomusicological studies, but she laments that they have “tended to focus more on the lived social reality of subculture... and rather less on the musical processes that may have contributed to the rise of the cohort.”<sup>61</sup> In building upon Hebdige’s notion of subculture, Mark Slobin coined the term “superculture” to refer to that difficult-to-define cultural mainstream (“[t]he usual, the accepted, the statistically lopsided, the commercially successful, the statutory, the regulated, the most visible”<sup>62</sup>) against which subcultures position themselves. Still, Slobin’s “subcultures” are defined largely by their oppositional nature. While many within the

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<sup>60</sup> Still other terms proposed in lieu of “community” include “art world” (Howard Becker) and “simplex” (Richard Peterson and Howard White)

<sup>61</sup> Shelemay, “Musical Communities,” 360.

<sup>62</sup> Slobin, *Subcultural Sounds*, 29.

ragtime community undoubtedly view certain elements of the cultural mainstream with a level of distaste or downright disgust, many others have few such reservations and even embrace aspects of Slobin's "superculture." To characterize the ragtime community as a "subculture" would, I think, misrepresent the movement and its members.

Ruth Finnegan's notion of "pathways" was born from her study of local music-making in and around the town of Milton Keynes in England. Writing in the mid-late 1980s, Ruth Finnegan defined community as a paradigm in which "people are bound by numerous ties, know each other, and have some consciousness of personal involvement in the locality of which they feel part."<sup>63</sup> Because she found that the people she studied either traveled from other nearby localities to participate in music-making, or because people within a musical group such as a choir or large band might not even personally know all of the other members, her notion of "community" in such a context did not fit comfortably and instead took on a "nostalgic quasi-spiritual" sense.<sup>64</sup> Where individuals within a musical collectivity such as a choir or band in some cases shared *only* the experience of making music with little or no additional social life or knowledge of each others' domestic situations outside the group, the group became a microcosm of impersonal, anonymous city life—itsself the very antithesis of "community" in the minds of early anthropologists and sociologists like Robert Redfield.<sup>65</sup> If, as Finnegan does, we view community through the lens of a structuralist framework, her experiences seemingly

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<sup>63</sup> Finnegan, *Hidden Musicians*, 299.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Redfield, *Little Community*. Redfield describes a continuum from rural "folk" society to city "urban" society in which "community" is a hallmark of "folk" society and becomes less and less extant as one moves along the continuum towards "urban" society. Many scholars now recognize Redfield's rural/urban dichotomy as rather simplistic, but it bears mention for the influence it once enjoyed, vestigial traces of which appear in Finnegan's writing.

provide a model of Durkheimian society tipped in favor of mechanical solidarity, in which members maintain their cohesion through a rather superficial likeness arising from shared participation in the musical group and little else.<sup>66</sup> And yet, Finnegan acknowledges that even within such groups, members often build dynamic relationships, getting to know *enough* about each other that the opportunities to forge new friendships and generate a sense of belonging emerge.

Finnegan's "pathway" provides an alluring model for examining individuals' musical affiliations and experiences—a useful tool for discussing the who, how, what, and where of peoples' musical lives—but in downplaying the social connections made through music-making, the model seems ill-equipped to thoroughly analyze the *why*: the deep-rooted *meanings* participants attach to their musical affiliation and the ways in which close social integration within a group can influence music-making at both the individual and group levels. While Finnegan studied and wrote about amateur music-making in a rather specific, geographically-limited area, given the diversity of musicians, styles, and varying levels of commitment and "identity" among her subjects, assigning them to one or more "communities" would be understandably inappropriate. Of course, this makes them no less worthy of investigation, and her "pathways" model may be well-suited to analyzing musical experience where multiple interests and affiliations overlap within a bounded space, even if other dimensions of "community" are not recognizable.

Will Straw defines "scene" not as a replacement for "community," but as conceptually distinct. Community, he argues, "presumes a population group whose

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<sup>66</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. George Simpson (New York: Free Press, 1933).

composition is relatively stable... and whose involvement in music takes the form of an ongoing exploration of one or more musical idioms said to be rooted within a geographically specific historical heritage.”<sup>67</sup> By contrast, a music scene is “that cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization.”<sup>68</sup> Communities, in Straw’s definition, tend to exist in more well-defined geographic areas and function conservatively, orienting themselves towards perceived historical roots. Musical practices in communities are often informed by an allegiance to what members see as continuous traditions. Music scenes, on the other hand, generally do not exhibit such a strong historical component.

Like Finnegan’s “pathways,” Straw’s music scenes describe fluid and dynamic entities in which people may come and go, identifying with multiple music scenes simultaneously or perhaps with different scenes at different stages of their lives. (Similarly, a given music scene may encompass a range of musical styles.) Community carries with it the implication of a more static membership. This is not to suggest that music scenes lack the ability to forge meaningful interpersonal relationships or build social capital; precisely *because* music scenes provide a framework for studying the building of personal and musical alliances within musical and symbolic boundaries, Straw admits that in common usage, “scene” often functions “as a lazy synonym for globalized virtual communities of

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<sup>67</sup> Will Straw, “Systems of Articulation,” 373.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*



taste."<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, he argues for "scene" as a term capable of evoking a sense of social intimacy without invoking community's often nostalgic connotations.

While one could certainly speak in terms of a national "ragtime scene," or "pathway," or even "subculture," ultimately, I find it most appropriate to speak in terms of a ragtime "community" because that is how its members refer to themselves. According to sociologist Peter Hamilton, what matters most is not whether "community" exists by some external rubric, but whether the people involved *believe* it exists since, paraphrasing the Thomas Theorem, he observes that "if people believe a thing to be real, then it is real in its consequences for them."<sup>70</sup> In effect, if people consider themselves part of a community, they will behave accordingly. To this, Roger Abrahams adds "I suppose we must say simply that communities will define themselves."<sup>71</sup>

In spite of the efforts of certain scholars since the 1980s to avoid the word "community," Hamilton argues for its continued use in the social sciences, noting that to most people, "[c]ommunity continues to be of both a practical and an ideological significance." Because many ragtime enthusiasts believe fervently that there *is* a community, and because the term is both convenient and malleable, I will continue to use it in the manner prescribed by sociologist Anthony P. Cohen: as a "compass of individual

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<sup>69</sup> Will Straw, "Scenes and Sensibilities," *Public* 22/23 (2001): 248.

<sup>70</sup> Peter Hamilton in Cohen, *Symbolic Construction of Community*, 8. See also Robert K. Merton, "The Thomas Theorem and the Matthew Effect," *Social Forces* 74, no. 2 (December 1995): 279-424. The Thomas Theorem, credited jointly to husband-and-wife W. I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas, states that "[i]f men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." See Thomas and Thomas, *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs* (New York: Knopf, 1928), 572.

<sup>71</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, "Rituals in Culture," *Folklore Preprint Series* 5, no. 1 (Bloomington: Folklore Institute, 1977), 46-47.

identity”—<sup>72</sup>a symbolically-constructed social theory of similarity and difference shared among members of a bounded group.

In the course of my research, I witnessed time and again remarkable demonstrations of the bonds that unite members of the ragtime community. When my wife, a Japanese citizen, sought permanent resident status in the United States, she and I appealed to family, friends, and colleagues for brief testimonial letters to accompany her governmental application; by far, the greatest response came from our “ragtime friends.” When another ragtime pianist and his wife announced the birth of their first child, members of the ragtime community—unasked—provided toys, clothes, and even a crib. When a Scott Joplin Festival organizer and board member died suddenly, members of the ragtime community initiated, managed, and contributed to a campaign that raised nearly \$6,000 to be put towards her young daughter’s college education.

Perhaps the most impressive display that I witnessed of the strength of the ragtime community’s bonds occurred in 2013. The story is reminiscent of one related by Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone*;<sup>73</sup> it is one that Putnam uses to argue people’s need to connect with one another in community. Danny Matson is well-known and much loved in ragtime circles, traveling to multiple ragtime festivals a year where he is instantly recognizable for his short, slight build, broad-brimmed cowboy hat, colorful attire, and white handlebar moustache. Though not a musician or composer himself, Danny is an enthusiastic fan and patron, creating music “by remote control” (he says) through modest commissions he offers ragtime composers to write and perform new works. For several years prior to the

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<sup>72</sup> Cohen, *Symbolic Construction of Community*, 110.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 28.

2013 Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival, Danny had been suffering the effects of kidney failure, and his trips to festivals became increasingly scheduled around hospital visits for dialysis. His plight was well-known among his ragtime friends, and after several years on an organ transplant waiting list proved unproductive, the mood was apprehensive when Danny hushed the room at a lively afterglow party during the 2013 Joplin Festival to make a speech. Gingerly, but unsteadily, he mounted the raised platform in the center of the room, balancing himself with a hand on one of the two upright pianos. Clutching a microphone with the other, he made his announcement in a shaky voice. When it was over, he bought a round of drinks for everyone in the room.

The news was happy: when no kidney had come from some anonymous unfortunate, a healthy, younger musician from within the ragtime community (indeed, someone in the room) had come forward to offer one of his own. At a previous ragtime event where both were present, Danny Coots, perhaps the most celebrated drummer on the ragtime circuit, had come to Danny Matson volunteering to donate a kidney. Preliminary laboratory tests had confirmed the compatibility, and a transplant operation had been scheduled for later in the year. The announcement radiated like a shockwave through the ragtime community; it dominated conversations for the remainder of the festival, and quickly spread through e-mail listservs and online social networking sites to the larger ragtime community around the world. In the months that followed, the heroic tale of the two Dannys served as the inspiration for several ragtime compositions (William McNally's "Transplant This! Rag—Or, 'O Danny Boys'" and W. Brett Youens's "It Gets Better").

On the morning of 11 December 2013, Danny Matson and Danny Coots checked into a hospital near Madison, Wisconsin for the operation. Days before, members of Matson's family and friends from the ragtime community launched an online "Danny Festival" to celebrate the event. From a central "Danny Festival" Facebook group page, family posted surgery preparation photos and real-time updates of the procedure itself while ragtime friends from around the world contributed words of support and uploaded specially-recorded videos of themselves performing music in honor of the two Dannys. Some posted their own newly-composed works (e.g., Larisa Migachyov's "Danny's Rag No.  $\pi$ ") while others played thematically-appropriate rags (e.g. John Remmers playing "Scott Joplin's New Rag" in honor of the "new" kidney). The tributes from ragtime friends continued for days, even after word came that the transplant had been a success and both Dannys were recovering well.

### **1.3.3 My role in the ragtime community**

Since 2003, I have been an active participant in the ragtime community: as performer (pianist), composer, researcher, recording producer, contest judge (both performance and composition contests), audience member, and general enthusiast. At times, I have participated strictly for the enjoyment of it with no thought of academics; at other times, I have been keenly aware of my role as a researcher and musicologist conducting fieldwork. This project is in part the result of my twelve-year immersion in the ragtime

community, drawing both upon formal and informal observations and experiences. I have supplemented my fieldwork with detailed study of archival sources.

As a participant-observer, I have traveled to more than two-dozen ragtime festivals and events across the United States.<sup>74</sup> At these events, I have come to know, personally, dozens of fellow ragtime performers, event organizers, and other enthusiasts. My interactions with them have ranged from the formal settings of the concert hall or organizational board meeting to the casual atmosphere of an ice cream shop, pub, bowling alley, or “after hours” party. At the festivals, I have carried devices for recording performances and interviews, ranging from a portable digital audio tape (DAT) recorder, to a Zoom H2 flash-based audio recorder, to flash-based digital still and video cameras. Apart from the obvious benefits of recording a particular musical performance for later analysis, in the bustling atmosphere of a festival, the ability to record “mini” interviews at a moment’s notice has been invaluable in capturing the thoughts and responses of performers and audience members in a “natural,” unobtrusive way. Ragtime festivals tend to have much activity with tight schedules to keep, often precluding lengthy formal interviews. Many of my more in-depth interviews have been conducted by phone or in personal visits, away from the distractions and time constraints of a festival.

At the festivals, I have participated in various roles. I have attended most as a contracted, paid performer. Just as many graduate students—driven by financial necessity—often choose the school that offers the most attractive scholarship, fellowship, or teaching assistant position, I, like many other performers, often choose which festivals

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<sup>74</sup> See Appendix A for a listing of the festivals I attended during the period covered by this project.

to attend on the basis of which can offer a performer's stipend to offset travel, lodging, and other costs. The demands placed upon performers at festivals are usually few; typically, a schedule for each performer prepared by the festival's organizers specifies several "sets" the performer must play each day, but otherwise, performers are free to enjoy the festival as any other attendee, with "all events" badges customarily provided to the festival's other programs, concerts, etc. Thus, as a performer at various festivals, I feel I have had "the best of both worlds"—the opportunity to experience each festival from the perspective of regular attendees with the added benefit of the backstage perspective of a performer. Many of my most enlightening interviews at festivals with other composers and performers have taken place in the calm and comfort of behind-the-scenes "green rooms" that would not have been easily accessible to me had I not also been a performer.

In addition to my face-to-face interactions with the ragtime community, I have also kept up with the community's discourse online. In early 2005, an e-mail listserv for discussing ragtime existed, but it was crippled by the absence of a moderator and the resulting overabundance of "spam" messages. Legitimate messages were posted only sporadically, and they often met with little or no response. In October of that year, dissatisfied with the state of the listserv, two others and I established the online "EliteSyncopations" ragtime discussion group, which has since attracted nearly 400 members and amassed an archive of over 13,600 messages. From the group's inception, I have served as one of three moderators, a role that has required me to screen all messages (generally taking action only for spam or blatantly offensive posts) and remain engaged with the discussions. With the subsequent rise of Facebook, activity in the e-mail listserv

has slowed as discussion has moved to several ragtime-related groups on Facebook that offer real-time updating (as opposed to daily digest e-mails of the listserv) and the easier attachment of digital audio, video, and image files. I have continued to follow the activity of the ragtime-related Facebook groups.

For seven years, from 2003 to 2010, I operated *Elite Syncopations Radio*, a 24-hour ragtime internet “radio” station. As station owner, I selected all music played on the station, drawing on recordings from my own collection of LPs, 78s, cassettes, and CDs as well as solicited and unsolicited recordings sent to me by other collectors and musicians. I encoded all recordings in MP3 format and uploaded them to an online server for randomized continuous streaming. With limited online storage space, I frequently deleted older tracks to make room for new ones to keep the playlist “fresh.” Early on, I established weekly “live” programs in which I served as disc jockey, taking requests and featuring new ragtime releases. The live broadcasts were supplemented with a simultaneous internet chat room (hosted on another musician’s web site) that allowed listeners to interact in real time and discuss the recordings being played. The live broadcasts/chats provided a weekly online meeting for several dozen dedicated “regulars” in which participants could—and did—voice their opinions of compositions and performances. The interactive programs also provided a valuable opportunity for participants (myself included) to hear new music of interest, and a platform for more experienced collectors and historians to share their knowledge. In addition to the voiced positive and negative opinions, selections played on the broadcast often elicited stories and memories from the more senior participants. The broadcasts thus became an efficient and effective means of

prompting discussion, and in at least several instances, provided the impetus for new ragtime compositions.<sup>75</sup> Regrettably, rising costs associated with maintaining the station coupled with increasingly cumbersome broadcast software and other demands on my own time led me to discontinue *Elite Syncopations Radio* in late 2010, though I continue to hear from former listeners in the United States and abroad.

In 2004, I launched my own record label devoted to ragtime and early jazz, Rivermont Records, extending my involvement into the business realm as well. For Rivermont, I have produced some three dozen discs by present-day ragtime and early jazz musicians and an equal number of historical reissues. Like the owners of other small independent labels, I have been intimately involved with nearly every aspect of production for most discs, serving variously as performer, recording and mastering engineer, graphic designer, liner note author, editor, promoter, distributor, and business manager. In some cases, musicians have supplied finished or nearly finished recordings, in other cases I have traveled nearby (Maryland and New York) or far away (London, Tokyo, and Buenos Aires) to supervise recording sessions.

My work with Rivermont has given me valuable insight into music commodification, an important but often overlooked corner of many music revivals and communities. The time- and labor-intensive process of producing a recording for commercial release not only tests the strength of friendships, but more importantly, in the controlled environments of the recording and design studios, where every detail of the final product must be considered, it is deeply revealing of the ways in which musicians

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<sup>75</sup> On 13 September 2010, I was surprised to awaken to an e-mail message in my inbox from Vincent Johnson containing a PDF attachment of his new composition "Finger 'Em Fourths," inspired, Vincent told me, by the *Elite Syncopations Radio* live broadcasts and touchingly dedicated to me as a birthday gift.



and producers—and by extension listening audiences—*think* about music. Selecting the repertoire to be recorded is a delicate balancing act that involves considering the performer’s wants (What does the performer want to record?), skills (Is the performer capable of performing the chosen repertoire sufficiently well for commercial release?), and also the wants of prospective customers (Will the performer and repertoire interest buyers?). After recording, agonizing over which “take” to use or which portions of different takes to edit together into a final composite provides a valuable opportunity to consider and discuss musical aesthetics in minutest detail. Likewise, the graphic design and design of related promotional materials reveals much about the identity musicians seek to fashion for themselves. While I have cultivated my own aesthetics in ten years of operating Rivermont based on a combination of my own sensibilities and what I think will appeal to buyers, working with other musicians on recording projects has meant making compromises that make me keenly aware of what is important to them and how they present themselves (and their music) to others.

Outside the “structured” settings of festivals, concerts, listservs, and recording projects, I have maintained close, personal friendships with a number of people from the ragtime community. Several of my ragtime friends were present for my wedding in Virginia in May 2010. I have traveled across the United States—from New York City to Washington, D.C. to St. Louis to Texas to the panhandle of Idaho—to visit fellow “ragtimers” at their homes and celebrate special occasions such as birthdays and weddings with them. Online, I keep in touch with the ragtime community through several ragtime e-mail listservs (such as the aforementioned EliteSyncopations group), personal e-

mails, and various social sites like YouTube and Facebook. Observing, communicating, and participating within this broad range of social contexts has enabled me to integrate fully within the ragtime community and build a strong rapport with my informants that extends beyond “researcher” and “subject.”

#### 1.4 PURPOSE AND OUTLINE

The goals of this dissertation are twofold: (1) to document the origins and development of the piano ragtime revival movement and the rise of a North American ragtime community, providing an account of ragtime activity since the 1940s that is largely absent from scholarly literature; (2) to contribute to scholarly research on music revivalism and music communities.

In Chapter 2, I uncover the origins of the ragtime revival, situating it within a larger “traditional jazz” revival of the 1930s and 1940s. I discuss and analyze some of the more significant writings on ragtime of the 1940s in an effort to show how they laid the groundwork for Blesh and Janis’s seminal work *They All Played Ragtime*, which in turn provided the foundation on which much of the later ragtime revival was built. While a few of the developments of the 1940s that I trace have been summarily noted in previous writings on the ragtime revival, this chapter represents the first effort to look at that decade’s ragtime writings in any detail with the aim of establishing a basis for many of the

axioms that have come to characterize and define the ragtime revival since the early 1960s.

In Chapter 3, I examine three of the notable ragtime publications (and the organizations or individuals behind them) that emerged in the 1960s to unite and serve the ragtime community: *The RagTime Review*, *The Ragtimer*, and *The Rag Times*. These publications generally began among “revivalist-collectors” who sought to network with others who shared their interest and to disseminate sheet music, recordings, books, and other source material that would be of use to ragtime enthusiasts. By the end of the 1960s, each of the three had established its own regularly-scheduled festival, bash, or meeting to bring ragtime enthusiasts together physically, further promoting a sense of “community.” In Chapter 3, I also discuss changes in U.S. copyright law that affected the ways in which these publications, clubs, and societies could share source material.

In Chapter 4, I discuss the Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival in Sedalia, Missouri, the largest and longest-lived ragtime festival. I argue that the festival’s association with Sedalia—long acknowledged as the historic “Cradle of Ragtime”—has helped it to achieve success and re-establish Sedalia as ragtime’s “homeland” in the twenty-first century as it was more than a century ago.

In Chapter 5, I trace the origins of the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest, an institution that, since 1974, has provided a means of entry into the ragtime community for many performers—myself included. With its roots in the ragtime-era tradition of “cutting contests,” the Contest provides an open stage where anyone can participate.

In Chapter 6, I theorize the nature of “authenticity” as a unifying symbol in the ragtime revival community, showing how shifting notions of authenticity—from those built on product-oriented criteria to those built on process-oriented criteria—have helped to shape the ragtime community from the 1940s to the early 2000s.

Because the ragtime revival had its origins among writers and collectors, many of whom understood the value of recording their findings and activities (if more to foster effective communication among themselves than for posterity), the revival’s formative years were well-documented in newsletters, magazines, record liner notes, and other ephemera. Distributed chiefly among ragtime enthusiasts and revival community members, few such documents have found their way into institutionalized archives. To my knowledge, none of the major ragtime revival newsletters (*The RagTime Review*, *The Ragtimer*, *The Rag Times*) has been microfilmed or comprehensively digitized. Those issues that survive exist almost exclusively in the basements, attics, and closets of early revivalists who saved them. With so much of the ragtime revival’s autobiographical history thus hidden, few scholars have attempted to trace the movement’s origins or development in any detail. A significant component of this study has been to construct a narrative of the ragtime revival’s formative years from the 1940s through the early 1970s based on my own examination of complete or nearly-complete runs of the aforementioned newsletters and other primary sources. I am particularly grateful to Adam Swanson, Max Morath, Peter Lundberg, Fred Hoeptner, David “Smiley” Wallace, John S. Maddox, Arthur Zimmerman, and others who kindly granted me access to their collections of ragtime revival newsletters. I hope that this historiographic account of the revival’s early years will

provide the groundwork for my own or others' future study of the revival as a complex and fascinating phenomenon.

## 2.0 A HISTORY OF THE RAGTIME REVIVAL IN THE 1940s AND 1950s

*Ragtime dead? Hell it ain't even sick!*

BOB DARCH<sup>1</sup>

On Christmas Day 1973, director George Roy Hill's film *The Sting* opened in New York City. Buoyed by favorable pre-release reviews, the story of two Depression-era con men who plot to cheat a ruthless mob boss successfully vied for top box office sales against Woody Allen's *Sleeper*, William Friedkin's *The Exorcist*, and Franklin Schaffner's *Papillon*, taking in \$249,377 at five theaters in its opening week.<sup>2</sup> Despite wide praise for the script, acting, and production values, some initial reviewers cited the musical score as the film's major weakness. *Variety* film critic Art Murphy dismissed it as "too thin" and "perhaps a decade too early."<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, within weeks of the film's opening, the soundtrack LP was among *Billboard* magazine's "Top Album Picks" (in the "pop" category, no less), and by 26 January 1974 the record was listed among *Billboard's* "Top [100] LP's & Tape."<sup>4</sup> Whatever reservations early critics may have had about the film's music, evidently those sentiments were not shared by the industry or the wider public. After *The Sting* won seven

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Jack Cuff, "The Ragtime Society Incorporated: A Time for Recapitulation, 1962-1972," *The Ragtimer*, November 1972, 11.

<sup>2</sup> "N.Y. Zingy; 'Sting,' in 5, 249G; Three Sites Give 'Papillon' 161G," *Variety*, 2 January 1974, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Murphy, "The Sting," review of *The Sting* [film], *Variety*, 12 December 1973, 16.

<sup>4</sup> "Top Album Picks: Billboard's Recommended LP's," *Billboard*, 19 January 1974, 66. See also "Top LP's & Tape," *Billboard*, 27 April 1974, 56.

Academy Awards (including “Best Picture” and “Best Music”) on 2 April, sales of the soundtrack skyrocketed, and by 4 May, it was the top selling LP in the United States.<sup>5</sup> For over a month, it held the number one position on *Billboard’s* album chart, ahead of Paul McCartney, Cat Stevens, John Denver, Chicago, Gordon Lightfoot, Elton John, and others before slowly ceding ground over the summer.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, a single of the film’s main theme enjoyed similar success, peaking at number three on *Billboard’s* “Hot 100” in late May.<sup>7</sup> Marvin Hamlisch, nominal arranger and conductor of the score, was voted “Best New Artist” at the following year’s Grammy Awards, where *The Sting’s* main theme also won for “Best Pop Instrumental Performance.”

The music of *The Sting*, of course, was predominantly ragtime—the ragtime, specifically, of Scott Joplin. The soundtrack prominently featured solo piano renditions and orchestrated arrangements of such Joplin rags as “The Entertainer” (which served as the film’s main theme), “Easy Winners,” “Pine Apple Rag,” “Gladiolus Rag,” “The Rag-Time Dance,” and Joplin’s tango-inspired “Solace.” As *Variety’s* Murphy pointed out and as Hill himself admitted, Joplin’s turn-of-the-century rags were hardly period-appropriate for a film set in 1936 Chicago, but Hill wrote that “I kept connecting in my mind the marvelous humor and high spirits of his [Joplin’s] ‘rags’ with the kind of spirit I wanted to get out of the film,” adding “I don’t much care whether the music is in strict period or not. If I thought a jazz band would give me the feeling I wanted for a Roman Epic, I’d use it.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “The Sting,” IMDb, accessed 8 August 2013, [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070735/awards?ref\\_=tt\\_awd](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070735/awards?ref_=tt_awd). See also “Top LP’s & Tape,” *Billboard*, 4 May 1974, 66.

<sup>6</sup> “Top LP’s & Tape,” *Billboard*, 1 June 1974, 54.

<sup>7</sup> “Hot 100,” *Billboard*, 1 June 1974, 52.

<sup>8</sup> George Roy Hill, *The Sting* [Soundtrack liner notes], MCA 2040, 1974, 33 1/3 rpm. The story of how, in 1972, Hill first came to hear Joplin’s rags on records played for him by his son, and how he later approached

The anachronistic use of Joplin’s music may have done more to enhance rather than limit its appeal. Following the “honky-tonk” boom of the 1950s and early 1960s, many would have had reason to regard ragtime suspiciously, as kitschy nostalgia of dubious artistic merit, full of unpleasantly de-tuned pianos and singalong choruses meant to evoke an old-time saloon of the “Gay ’90s.” Hill and Hamlich’s classically-inspired “concert” treatment of the music—with well-tuned solo piano parts alternating with the more conservatory-style, regimented approach to the orchestrations (based on Gunther Schuller’s reworking of period “Red Back Book” arrangements)—coupled with the dramatic re-contextualization of the music into 1930s Chicago in its simultaneously lavish and seedy glory must have struck most movie-going audiences in 1974 as refreshing and new.

Even forty years after the film’s release, *The Sting* remains a significant force in ragtime; many in the present community still trace their initial interest in the music to the 1974 blockbuster, and through home video releases it continues to attract new audiences for ragtime. As a conduit, *The Sting* certainly provided the most high-profile outlet for ragtime since the music’s ubiquitousness during the “ragtime era,” however, it did not initiate the ragtime revival, nor was it wholly responsible for rebranding ragtime from music of the saloon to music fit for a concert hall. Rather, it cast onto the national stage a music that to the general public was often misunderstood or forgotten, helping to popularize a new vision of what ragtime may have been and what potential it had yet to be. The success of the film and its soundtrack provided a powerful shot in the arm to a

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Joshua Rifkin and Gunther Schuller to score the film is well-documented in Terry Waldo’s book *This Is Ragtime*. See Chapter 10: “The 1970s: The Joplin Revival.”



musical revival movement that had already been simmering for nearly three decades. In this chapter, following a brief review of the ragtime era, I will trace the origins of the ragtime revival movement through an analysis of the scattered writings on ragtime that appeared in the 1940s and 1950s and a look at the “honky-tonk” ragtime movement of the 1950s.

## 2.1 THE “RAGTIME ERA”

A number of scholars and historians before me have written eloquently and in detail on ragtime as it was in its heyday—foremost among them Edward A. Berlin, Rudi Blesh, Harriet Janis, John Hasse, Trebor Tichenor, David Jasen, Gene Jones, and Terry Waldo.<sup>9</sup> Collectively, they have told a story of ragtime’s genesis among itinerant pianists and minstrel performers in the latter half of the nineteenth century. They have written of the music’s rise to nationwide popularity in the 1890s and of its “glory days” in the first decade of the twentieth century, when such luminaries as Scott Joplin, James Scott, Joseph Lamb, Tom Turpin, Eubie Blake, Arthur Marshall, and others composed with such perceived nobility and purity of expression that they were credited with establishing America’s first unique “classical” music. They have written of ragtime’s eventual co-option

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<sup>9</sup> See the following: David Jasen and Gene Jones, *That American Rag: The Story of Ragtime From Coast to Coast* (New York: Schirmer, 2000); Edward Berlin, *King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); John Edward Hasse, ed., *Ragtime: Its History, Composers, and Music* (New York: Schurmer, 1985); Edward Berlin, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980); David Jasen and Trebor Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime: A Musical History* (New York: Dover, 1978); Terry Waldo, *This Is Ragtime* (New York: Hawthorn, 1976); Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They All Played Ragtime* (New York: Oak Publications, 1971).

by Tin Pan Alley hacks in the early 1910s who drove it towards its demise with cheap, watered-down imitations. Much has been written of the complex web of race relations woven among white publishers and black composers, and of ragtime's hotly debated moral standing as a music as likely to be found in the brothel as in the middle class parlor. A comprehensive survey of ragtime in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is beyond the scope of this study, but my usage of the term "ragtime era" merits a brief explanation.

Despite the possibility of unintended implications (for example, that *all* music of the 1890s-1910s was ragtime—it was not), I will use the term "ragtime era" as a succinct, convenient marker to distinguish the period of ragtime's original nationwide popularity from all subsequent revitalization movements. Among ragtime enthusiasts, the "ragtime era" generally refers to the period of approximately twenty years from 1897 to 1917 when ragtime was a dominant form of popular music in the United States, its success measured in terms of the quantity and quality of published compositions, sheet music sales, recordings, trade publications, documented performances (both professional and amateur), the frequency with which it appeared in public discourse, and its somewhat nebulously-defined musical "influence." Later attempts by scholars and music theorists to codify the form and structure of ragtime notwithstanding, at the height of the ragtime era, the terms "rag" and "ragtime" were used seemingly indiscriminately to refer to nearly *all* popular music.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Two different songs of the ragtime era sharing the title "Everything Is Ragtime Now" speak to the usage of the word "ragtime" to refer to then-current popular music in general—especially when contrasted with "classical" music or the sentimental love songs and ballads common in the late nineteenth century. The lyrics of the first (by Robert A. Keiser and Geo. Totten Smith, 1899), contrast Mendelssohn's "Wedding

Even when not explicitly linked with music, the “ragtime era” has become common parlance for the first decades of the twentieth century in the United States, coincident with the “Progressive Era,” and popularized largely by E. L. Doctorow’s seminal 1975 novel *Ragtime* which—although it had little to do with music—cast the ragtime era as a broader American historical period just after the so-called “Gilded Age” and up to the start of the first World War.<sup>11</sup> As both a large- and small-scale *Bildungsroman*—juxtaposing social changes at the family as well as national level—Doctorow’s book presents ragtime as a metaphor for American society in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Against an unnamed white, middle class family, the plot introduces a host of complex characters such as Tateh, the conservative immigrant Jew, and Coalhouse Walker, the black musician who refuses to be racially humiliated. “Father”

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March” and “old” songs like “Annie Laurie” and “In the Gloaming” with then-recent popular songs like “All Coons Look Alike to Me” (Ernest Hogan, 1896) and “Hello Ma Baby” (Joseph E. Howard and Ida Emerson, 1899), with the repeating dialect refrain “ebry [sic] thing is ragtime now!” The lyrics of the second (by J. Brandon Walsh and Charley Straight, 1913), similarly pit the “classics” and “song[s] of honeymoons” against then-current hits “Casey Jones” (T. Lawrence Seibert and Eddie Newton, 1909) and “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” (Irving Berlin, 1911), climaxing in the delightfully absurd chorus:

You hear ragtime songs sung by ragtime coons  
And ragtime pianos playing ragtime tunes  
You see ragtime soldiers marching down the street  
And ragtime butchers eating ragtime meat  
You see ragtime sailors sailing ragtime seas  
And ragtime Dutchmen eating ragtime cheese  
I saw a ragtime milk-maid milk a ragtime cow  
Ev’rything is ragtime  
Syncopated jag time  
Ev’rything is ragtime now.

Eight years later, as “jazz” similarly became a catch-all term for popular music, Tom Delaney’s “Jazz Me Blues” (1921) at one point admonished musicians:

Now if it’s ragtime  
Please sir will you play it in jazz time.

Despite the efforts of more recent scholars and specialists to narrowly define musical styles and genres (e.g. ragtime), the general public has long perceived such labels much more broadly.

<sup>11</sup> Douglas Fowler, *Understanding E. L. Doctorow* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 72.

and “Mother” of the white middle class family are bastions of gentility and Victorian inhibition, ultimately challenged and changed as their lives intersect with Tateh, Coalhouse Walker, and others, much as ragtime represents a grafting of disparate musical elements (rhythmic and melodic) onto European-derived “stock” (form and instrumentation). Even what Douglas Fowler called the relatively simplistic “Dick-and-Jane-and-Spot” prose<sup>12</sup> of Doctorow’s book provides a notable parallel to ragtime’s often simple harmonic “language” and clearly-defined structures.

If the ragtime era’s “beginning” is unambiguously marked by the 1897 publication of the first titular “Rag” (William H. Krell’s “Mississippi Rag”), its 1917 “ending” is more debatable since it is not tied to any “last” published rag. Rather, the closing of the ragtime era has come to be signified by the confluence of several notable political and musical events, both foreign and domestic. Around the world, the spring of 1917 was an especially turbulent one; following the February Revolution in Russia, Nicholas II abdicated in March, signaling the end of the Russian monarchy. Weeks later, on 6 April, the United States Congress voted to enter “the war to end all wars” that had been raging in Western Europe for nearly three years. Against the backdrop of such transformative world events, fashions in American popular music were changing rapidly. In late January and February, the Original Dixieland “Jass” Band made what have since become widely hailed as the first jazz recordings. As ushers of the coming “Jazz Age,” they—coupled with Scott

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 78.

Joplin's death in a New York City sanitarium on 1 April—provide a convenient bookend to the ragtime era.<sup>13</sup>

## 2.2 THE “TRADITIONAL JAZZ” REVIVAL OF THE 1930s AND 1940s

*[O]ne of the basic characteristics of any art which has existed ten years is simply that it is ten years old. By the time an art is twenty years old, it is ready for the museum, the school and the nursery; by the time it is thirty years old, we may expect to find it material for the newest discovery of the music critics.*

LYLE AND ELEANOR DOWLING<sup>14</sup>

It is a great irony that Hill chose the “classic” ragtime of Scott Joplin to underscore his 1930s melodrama, since not only was Joplin's music largely forgotten in the '30s, but by almost any metric, ragtime in general—and ragtime piano in particular—was at its lowest ebb for much of that decade. Edward A. Berlin has reported that “[f]ewer ragtime articles were written in the 1930s than at any other time in the music's history.”<sup>15</sup> Publisher John Stark—piano ragtime's fiercest proponent and also its last great holdout—had issued his final rag, James Scott's “Broadway Rag,” in 1922, some five years after most other publishers had ceased issuing new piano rags. A few piano rags lingered in publishers'

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<sup>13</sup> In Chapter 1, I identified the “ragtime era” as referring to the period 1897-1917 when ragtime was a dominant form of popular music in the United States. The same twenty-year span is often cited in other works discussing ragtime. See Jasen and Jones, *That American Rag*, xxii; Blesh and Janis, *They All Played Ragtime*, 3-6; John A. Fisher, Letter announcing the formation of the Ragtime Society, January 1962, in the author's possession. Some sources, such as John Edward Hasse's book, *Ragtime: Its History, Composers, and Music*, expand the date range to cover 1896-1920 (see pp. 28-36).

<sup>14</sup> Lyle and Eleanor Dowling, introduction to *Hot Jazz: The Guide to Swing Music*, by Hugues Panassié (New York: M. Witmark & Sons, 1936), x.

<sup>15</sup> Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 173.

catalogues throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, but most quietly disappeared as stocks were depleted.

In Stark's lifetime, the term "ragtime" had carried with it no precise, universally agreed-upon definition, but in the years surrounding his 1927 death, it splintered into so many musical directions that it became devoid of any specificity or potency. To some writers and critics of the mid-1930s, "ragtime" evoked primarily vocal music of the stage, especially that heard in Negro musical comedy revues of the 1890s and early 1900s.<sup>16</sup> To others, it was synonymous with Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, and the popular songwriters of Tin Pan Alley.<sup>17</sup> Very few associated ragtime principally with instrumental piano music; those who considered piano ragtime at all tended to gloss over it as a degenerate form of the music.<sup>18</sup> In the realm of jazz and swing, a number of new instrumental compositions were published or recorded in the 1920s and '30s that retained the vestigial designation "Rag" in their titles, but more often than not, they bore little resemblance in either form or style to the piano rags of only ten or twenty years earlier.<sup>19</sup> Most were works built around a single theme that served as the foundation for a string of improvised solos from the members of the band.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, in other musical circles, ragtime was being tossed into

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<sup>16</sup> Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (Washington, D.C.: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936), 57.

<sup>17</sup> Helen L. Kaufman, *From Jehovah to Jazz: Music in America from Psalmody to the Present Day* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1937),

<sup>18</sup> Berlin, *Ragtime*, 174. After a survey of ragtime literature from the 1930s, Berlin concludes that only Winthrop Sargeant, in a book titled *Jazz: Hot and Hybrid* (New York: Arrow Editions, 1938), gives piano ragtime fair consideration.

<sup>19</sup> Examples of popular jazz instrumentals of the 1920s and 1930s bearing titles with the word "Rag" include "Bugle Call Rag" by Jack Pettis, Billy Meyers, and Elmer Schoebel (1922); and "Music Hall Rag" by Benny Goodman (1934).

<sup>20</sup> Though he was speaking about ragtime in the context of "country" music, guitarist Merle Travis's comment that "a rag is a snappy little ditty that an instrumentalist plays to show off his ability to play" is applicable to many of the "jazz band rags" of the 1920s and '30s. See Norm Cohen and David Cohen,

the pot with “hillbilly” music. In the 1920s’ emerging market for “old-time” and “hillbilly” recordings, a handful of piano rags survived in string band arrangements, sometimes so transformed melodically and rhythmically as to be nearly unrecognizable.<sup>21</sup> In their “hillbilly” catalogues, in addition to adaptations of piano rags and an even greater number of “original” country rags not derived from earlier works, record labels also issued discs such as the Dizzy Trio’s “Hayseed Rag” (Victor 19421, recorded in 1924) which represent something of a return to the early ragtime era practice of combining short strains of folk melodies into episodic rag medleys. “Hayseed Rag” interpolates passages from Wilbur Sweatman’s 1911 “Down Home Rag” among such folk songs as “Reuben and Rachel,” “Chicken Reel,” “Turkey in the Straw,” and Stephen Foster’s “Old Folks at Home.” Although performed by seasoned, versatile New York studio musicians that included harmonica player Borrah Minevitch along with banjoist Roy Smeck (who doubled on jew’s harp), guitarist Carson Robison, and pianist Nathaniel Shilkret (Victor’s director of light classical music), the record’s somewhat tawdry portrayal of rural Appalachian music sold remarkably well: a reported 176,763 copies in just over a year.<sup>22</sup> “Hayseed Rag” and records like it undoubtedly contributed to a public view that saw ragtime as increasingly old-fashioned and ever more removed from its popular music descendants of the day.

It is perhaps all the more ironic, then, that the first stirrings of a ragtime piano revival were born of a reawakening in the music often cited as ragtime’s downfall: jazz.

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“Ragtime in Early Country Music,” in *Ragtime: Its History, Composers, and Music*, ed. John Edward Hasse (New York: Schirmer, 1985), 297.

<sup>21</sup> For an example, see Nap Hayes and Matthew Prater’s recording of the Scott Joplin-Scott Hayden collaboration “Something Doing” (Okeh 45231, recorded 15 February 1928).

<sup>22</sup> Discography of American Historical Recordings, accessed 22 August 2015, [http://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/objects/detail/14369/Victor\\_19421](http://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/objects/detail/14369/Victor_19421).

The efforts of Paul Whiteman, George Gershwin, Ferde Grofé, and others to “legitimize” it notwithstanding, jazz remained a source of derision among many American proponents of “art” music well into the 1930s. Marshall Stearns put it bluntly: “Have you ever heard the average devotee of classical music talk about jazz? A patronizing attitude of condescension hangs on him like a cigar-butt on the face of a politician. The fire is out and something smells...He can’t play or understand jazz, but he knows it’s terrible.”<sup>23</sup> Although European intellectuals, artists, and music enthusiasts had taken jazz more seriously on the whole—Ernest Ansermet, for example, had written glowingly of Sidney Bechet in 1919<sup>24</sup>—it remained until 1934 and publication of Hugues Panassié’s *Le Jazz Hot*, the first notable book of jazz criticism, for jazz to begin to gain widespread respectability in the United States.<sup>25</sup>

Paul Lopes has written at length on the rise of a “jazz art world” in the mid-1930s, led primarily by devotees of 1920s “hot” jazz who banded together in a collective effort to revitalize and preserve what they saw as an endangered, authentic jazz tradition.<sup>26</sup> “Traditional” New Orleans jazz, exemplified on record by King Oliver, Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, and others, was—they claimed—at risk of extinction in the face of more commercially successful jazz derivatives ranging from swing to so-called “Mickey Mouse” sweet bands.<sup>27</sup> From its beginnings among young, white, middle-class record collectors, a

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<sup>23</sup> Marshall Stearns, “Bessie Versus Beethoven,” *Music and Rhythm* 2 (1941): 5.

<sup>24</sup> See Ernest Ansermet, “Sidney Bechet in Europe, 1919,” in *The Art of Jazz*, ed. Martin T. Williams (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Whitney Balliett, *American Musicians II: Seventy-One Portraits in Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1. Panassié’s book was translated and published in English as *Hot Jazz* in 1936.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Lopes, *The Rise of a Jazz Art World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 157.

<sup>27</sup> Panassié reminds his readers of the words of jazz pianist and composer Michel Emer: “Moins la musique de jazz est authentique, plus elle a du succès.” (“The less authentic the jazz music, the more it is successful.”) See Hugues Panassié, *Le Jazz Hot* (Paris: Éditions R.-A. Corrêa, 1934), 20.



nascent traditional jazz “revival” movement gathered momentum, spawning its own literary criticism, with writers and theorists who championed the roughness and intensity that characterized black vernacular jazz over the cultivated, “pretentious” tastes and techniques of swing and emerging bebop musicians. Lopes suggests that to these connoisseurs of “traditional” jazz styles, excessive cultivation in most professional jazz musicians had “destroyed the vitality and true art of jazz.”<sup>28</sup> Buoyed by the publication of Charles Delaunay’s *Hot Discography* in 1936 which helped to codify and canonize hot jazz recordings for collectors and enthusiasts, by the end of the 1930s, the movement boasted a nationwide network of “Hot Clubs,” a half-dozen or more publications of note, and several important independent record labels. Such ventures were seldom profitable—indeed, many struggled financially—but they carried on, fueled by their founders’ passion for jazz and a “missionary zeal” to resurrect “righteous jazz” in the United States and beyond.<sup>29</sup> The earliest proponents of the jazz revival seem not to have been musicians, except, perhaps, at the amateur level. In response to their efforts, however, there soon emerged young professional bands such as Lu Watters’s Yerba Buena Jazz Band who dedicated themselves to reviving the repertoire, instrumentation, and something of the style associated with early New Orleans and Chicago jazz bands. In performance, on record, and in print, the renaissance of traditional jazz that began in the late 1930s

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<sup>28</sup> Lopes, 158.

<sup>29</sup> Lopes, 163. Lopes notes Marshall Stearns’s ambitions for a U.S.-based international organization to promote “hot” jazz the world over, and he quotes from a 1935 Stearns article that appeared in *Jazz Hot* magazine: “At last the numerous organizations of the western hemisphere, composed of truly appreciative hot-fans, will have the opportunity to unite and make their convictions felt as one all-powerful man. Such an organization will have tremendous power, and justly so, for there is much to be done... From America, where the first strains of jazz originated, comes a new and vital interest in the phenomenon of jazz.” (*Jazz Hot* 9/10, 1935: 1)

persisted well into the 1950s, paralleling and occasionally reacting to developments in swing, bebop, and even rock 'n' roll.

Paradoxically, Panassié and other literary champions of hot jazz were at first reluctant to consider the music's roots. "If we have set aside the question of the origin of jazz, it is because...it has no direct bearing on our subject," he wrote in introducing *Le Jazz Hot*, "[o]ur sole aim...is to give a precise idea of jazz in its definitive form."<sup>30</sup>

Panassié, like many of his fellow critics, considered the music's "definitive" form to be that which existed etched in the grooves of commercially-issued 78 rpm records. Living in France with only the occasional opportunity to hear visiting American jazz musicians "live," Panassié's thoughts and observations on jazz were informed primarily by the records he was able to obtain and perhaps the occasional shortwave radio broadcast. Pressed in shellac, jazz performances spanning the preceding fifteen years achieved for Panassié a timeless immediacy unmatched by jazz's unrecorded progenitors who existed only in a nebulous musical pre-history. Thus, Panassié and his contemporaries were most interested in describing and discussing hot jazz as it existed in the present or recent "recorded" past, while encouraging the music's future development along stylistic lines they found agreeable.

By the early 1940s, the jazz revival movement spread to include not only record collectors and critics but professional and semi-professional musicians as well. As traditional New Orleans jazz began to achieve some modicum of hard-won commercial

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<sup>30</sup> Panassié, 22. "Si nous avons laissé de côté la question de l'origine du jazz, c'est que, malgré son intérêt, cela n'entraîne pas directement dans notre sujet, puisque notre seul but est de donner une notion précise de ce qu'est le jazz fixé dans sa forme définitive..." (Translation mine.)

and critical success on records and radio,<sup>31</sup> the movement ultimately found that it could no longer ignore—as Panassié conveniently had—the “question of the origin of jazz.” In the magazines that catered to traditional jazz enthusiasts, discussions of jazz “roots” had become ubiquitous almost to the point of obsession by the early 1940s. The authors of feature articles as well as editorials and letters to the editor vigorously debated the extent to which elements of jazz could be traced to the dancing in New Orleans’s Congo Square, “Negro folk music,” and even African “jungle music.”<sup>32</sup> In 1944, such discussions culminated in a regular series of articles by Ernest Borneman in *The Record Changer* titled “The Anthropologist Looks at Jazz.” In them, the self-proclaimed anthropologist and ethnomusicologist (reportedly a student of Erich von Hornbostel)<sup>33</sup> undertook an extensive analysis of the rhythmic, melodic, and timbral elements of jazz. He emphasized those features that he could trace to specific examples of music-making in Africa, but he considered also the role of Euro-American influences, including Wesleyan Methodist hymns of the eighteenth century. If such topics struck some readers as arcane or irrelevant, they seem to have been a silent minority. For many, arriving at a better understanding of jazz’s ancestry was crucial to establishing artistic legitimacy and securing a future for

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<sup>31</sup> In early 1944, “traditional” jazz found an unlikely ally in Orson Welles, who hired for his CBS “Mercury Theatre” radio broadcasts a band consisting of New Orleans stalwarts Edward “Kid” Ory (trombone and leader), Thomas “Mutt” Carey (trumpet), Jimmie Noone (clarinet), Bud Scott (banjo), Ed Garland (bass), and Zutty Singleton (drums) along with pianist Buster Wilson. Nesuhi Ertegun, in the liner notes to the Kid Ory LP *Tailgate!* (Kid Ory’s Creole Jazz Band, Good Time Jazz L-12022, 1957), reports that listener response was so favorable that Welles hired the band for thirteen weeks, and they subsequently made a series of successful records for the Crescent label. Ertegun writes that the Ory band’s performances on radio and records “gave eloquent proof of the continuing vitality of New Orleans jazz at a time when such proof was needed.”

<sup>32</sup> R. E. Stearns and Gordon Gullickson, “The Blind Men and the Elephant,” *The Record Changer*, February 1944, 12.

<sup>33</sup> Nat Hentoff and Albert J. McCarthy, eds., *Jazz: New Perspectives on the History of Jazz by Twelve of the World’s Foremost Jazz Critics and Scholars* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1959), 2.

traditional jazz. As Eugene Williams observed in 1941, “the real jazz is the stuff which came out of New Orleans, flavored with ragtime and rooted in the blues;...this music is as valid today as it ever was, and...the best hope for jazz is to rediscover those roots.”<sup>34</sup>

Although traditional jazz was on the rebound, there were many who felt that its growing public appeal was merely a passing fad, and that “flash-in-the-pan” success could still precipitate another fall into obscurity. While some, like Williams, appeared optimistic that a blues and ragtime “rediscovery” would help to stabilize and ensure the continued survival of the floundering New Orleans jazz revival, others, like Nesuhi Ertegun, suggested that the movement’s efforts—while well-intentioned and commendable—would ultimately prove futile. Writing in early 1943, Ertegun praises as “admirable musicians” the members of Lu Watters’s Yerba Buena Jazz Band (then at the forefront of the revival), but he sees them and their small legion of fans as an isolated case. He reminds the reader that “[n]o art can survive without an audience,” and he concludes that, for the most part, “New Orleans music has lost its audience.”<sup>35</sup> Young musicians, too, he claims, have lost the techniques and “style of interpretation” necessary for the true “resurrection” of traditional jazz.<sup>36</sup> Responding directly to Williams’s 1941 comments on the importance of rediscovering jazz’s roots, Ertegun insists that “nobody so far has been able to show how these roots could be rediscovered,” closing with the quiet challenge: “I suspect nobody ever will... [m]usically speaking, history does not repeat itself.”<sup>37</sup> Even as Ertegun wrote those words, others in the burgeoning collective of traditional jazz enthusiasts were

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<sup>34</sup> Eugene Williams, “A History of Jazz Information,” *Jazz Information*, November 1941, 100.

<sup>35</sup> Nesuhi Ertegun, “A Style and a Memory,” *The Record Changer*, April 1943, 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

endeavoring to do just that. With the stated goal of shoring up the foundation in the house of jazz, a handful of jazz critics and historians were already setting their sights on ragtime.

### 2.3 WRITINGS ABOUT RAGTIME IN THE 1940s

*Years ago we had ragtime, and in later years they changed the name to Jazz. Now, years later we've changed it to Swing, but it's goin' back to jazz, and back to jazz it's goin' right on home to ragtime.*

BUNK JOHNSON<sup>38</sup>

In positing a general theory of revitalization movements (of which revival movements are a type), Anthony F. C. Wallace defines them as deliberate, organized efforts by members of society “to construct a more satisfying culture.”<sup>39</sup> In contrast with gradual culture changes that occur over generations in response to processes of acculturation, evolution, drift, diffusion, and historical change, revitalization movements occur abruptly and grow quickly—often within a single generation—and are conceived in some “brief and dramatic moment of insight, revelation, or inspiration.”<sup>40</sup> Since Wallace is primarily concerned with religious revitalization movements (though he acknowledges the existence of secular ones), such moments of insight are most often manifested in hallucinatory visits or dreams by a single individual who subsequently becomes a “prophet” when he or she uses such

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<sup>38</sup> William Russell, “Notes on Tom Turpin,” *The Record Changer*, February 1944, 18.

<sup>39</sup> Anthony F. C. Wallace, “Revitalization Movements,” *American Anthropologist* New Series, Vol. 58, No. 2 (April 1956): 265.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

insight to introduce and guide others to a new “mazeway *Gestalt*.”<sup>41</sup> The prophet, in Wallace’s model, is usually an individual disaffected by society; cultural changes have induced mounting “stress” that most continue to tolerate, but which the prophet seeks to ease by restructuring elements and subsystems of the mazeway. In essence, the prophet performs some action or introduces some new ideology that—when it is adopted and perpetuated by others—instigates a revitalization movement.

Attempting to pinpoint and distill a particular moment of insight—an ideological “big bang”—that single-handedly leads to a musical revival movement may in many cases be a fool’s errand; yet, among those in the ragtime community, there is widespread consensus that publication of the book *They All Played Ragtime* by Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis in 1950 marks—if not the absolute beginning—at least a significant turning point in the development of the ragtime revival and its emergent community. The book not only offered the first significant narrative account of ragtime’s genesis, rise to popularity, development, and decline, but it humanized the music to newcomers with biographical sketches of notable composers, pianists, and publishers. It established (if tacitly) a hierarchy among ragtime composers with Joplin firmly at top, and it reinforced ragtime’s geographic “homeland” in Missouri. In colorful, dramatic prose laced with its authors’ evangelical zeal, *They All Played Ragtime* advocated for ragtime’s acceptance as a respectable music, legitimizing it with comparisons to Mozart, Schubert, and Chopin.<sup>42</sup>

In some respects, however, *They All Played Ragtime* was *not* the revolutionary work subsequent generations of ragtime enthusiasts have claimed it to be. It did not

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 266. Wallace defines “mazeway” as an individual’s mental image of society and culture, writing “The mazeway is nature, society, culture, personality, and body image as seen by one person.”

<sup>42</sup> Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They All Played Ragtime* (New York: Oak Publications, 1971), xiii.

present the gospel of ragtime *ex nihilo*. Many of its basic tenets echo what other ragtime writers had been saying for nearly a decade in a plethora of articles published in books and magazines aimed primarily at jazz aficionados. When Blesh and Janis set out to research and write their book in the summer of 1949, a basic chronology for ragtime's rise and fall had already been established; its foremost exponents (with the exception of Joseph Lamb) had been identified and discussed with the general consensus that Scott Joplin represented the music's zenith; John Stark had been recognized as presiding over ragtime's most important publishing house; stylistic analyses had codified "classic" ragtime's form and key musical characteristics; ragtime's worthier examples had been likened to eighteenth and nineteenth century European "classical" music; and Sedalia, Missouri had already been singled out as the "Cradle of Ragtime." Nevertheless, by distilling what had already been written about ragtime—by collecting in one place the scattered thoughts and observations put forth in esoteric articles for niche audiences over the previous decade—and by adding the findings of their own considerable research, Blesh and Janis sought to engage a more general audience. They wrote not only for the initiated, but also for musical novices who might be brought into the emerging ragtime fold; in so doing, they liberated ragtime from its guarded reliquary among the cognoscenti and sowed the seeds for restoration and revival.

In the decades since *They All Played Ragtime* was first published, it has become the target of frequent attacks by scholars and historically-minded ragtime enthusiasts who have noted Blesh and Janis's penchant for omitting, glossing over, or distorting certain facts or details—and sometimes inventing them—in their pursuit of a more compelling

story. Problematic, too, is the authors' heavy reliance upon interviews with aged musicians, family members, and friends in lieu of a more thorough examination of written primary sources when piecing together their historical narrative. Except to discuss how certain features and idiosyncrasies of the book had a demonstrable impact on the ragtime revival, it is not my intention to pick apart the book's shortcomings. Rather, I will show how *They All Played Ragtime* played an influential role in shaping the tone, focus, and scope of ragtime discourse in a way that set the stage for a lasting revival and fostered the development of a ragtime community.

In the sections that follow, I will first examine some of the notable articles on ragtime that predated *They All Played Ragtime* before turning to the book itself. Of the writings on ragtime published in the ten years prior to *They All Played Ragtime*, most can be categorized as fitting one or more of the following three types: (1) an author's personal recollection of the "ragtime era"; (2) a biographical sketch of some notable composer or musician; or (3) an attempt to define ragtime and describe its chief characteristics, usually through a rudimentary, cursory stylistic analysis of whatever rags were available to the author. A comprehensive survey of the various articles and other writings on ragtime that appeared in the 1940s is beyond the scope of this study; however, detailed examination of several prominent writings will help to frame the context in which most enthusiasts understood ragtime in the years leading up to publication of *They All Played Ragtime*.



### 2.3.1 *The Jazz Record Book* (1942)

Among the earliest “revival era” writings on ragtime is a five-page entry in the introduction to *The Jazz Record Book*, a 1942 collaboration among four prominent jazz critics and independent producers of jazz recordings: Charles Edward Smith, Frederic Ramsey Jr., Charles Payne Rogers, and William Russell. The book was published by Smith & Durrell as a companion to their successful classical-oriented 1940 *Record Book* (by David Hall). Smith et al. seek to provide a history of jazz, coupled with an annotated guide to records they deem worthy—both reissues and contemporary recordings—since, in their opinion, “[t]he most satisfactory source for the study of this music is the recorded performance on phonograph records.”<sup>43</sup> In the absence of any source citations, much of the historical accounting amounts to little more than hearsay; nevertheless, the passage on ragtime, despite some factual errors, provides a startlingly vivid account of ragtime activity at the turn of century in St. Louis. In the five pages devoted to ragtime, the authors seem most concerned with impressing upon the reader a glib caricature of the music’s originators, describing them as “hardy pioneers of the keyboard [who] played from ten or so at night until the small hours, nonchalantly reading Nick Carter novels as they played, not even pausing while they turned pages.”<sup>44</sup> Between such colorful scenes, however, the authors make the following observations:

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<sup>43</sup> Charles Edward Smith et al, *The Jazz Record Book* (New York: Smith & Durrell, 1942), 26.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

1. Ragtime developed separately from instrumental jazz; the two forms share a common musical ancestor—blues—but little else.
2. Ragtime music was primarily composed for the piano and performed on that instrument, though rags were often also arranged for bands.
3. Ragtime flourished first in and around St. Louis of the 1890s (it “beat the Manhattan boys to the gun by a good decade and more”<sup>45</sup>) where it was most likely to be heard in sporting houses, honky-tonks, and wine rooms.
4. Ragtime was primarily the musical realm of “Negroes who saw in this field a chance to enjoy some of the fruits of freedom.”<sup>46</sup>
5. The foremost composers and exponents of ragtime were Tom Turpin, Scott Joplin, and Louis Chauvin.<sup>47</sup>
6. Ragtime is best performed at a moderate tempo<sup>48</sup>
7. Ragtime is characterized by “a liquid clarity of melodic line” matched by a solid bass construction: “the art of making two hands do the work of four.”<sup>49</sup>

Aside from the last comment, curiously absent is any substantive discussion of ragtime’s defining musical characteristics (despite aspirations to serious musical analysis elsewhere in the book). The authors eschew any discussion of vocal ragtime or its arrangement for instruments such as the banjo, mandolin, or guitar, even as they remain

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Russell revisited the subject of Tom Turpin in an article for *The Record Changer* (“Tom Turpin Notes”) in February 1944 that seems drawn almost entirely from the *Jazz Record Book*’s Turpin discussion.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

mindful to specify that they are discussing “pianistic ragtime.” Aside from a brief mention that better pianists in wine rooms and sporting houses could sometimes profit from generous pay or tips, no attempt is made to discuss the “business” of ragtime such as publishers and sheet music sales. Missing, too, is any mention of the two composers—James Scott and Joseph Lamb—who, with Scott Joplin, would come to be hailed as ragtime’s “Big Three” in later ragtime discourse. Smith *et al* focus most intently on Turpin, whom they erroneously believe to have published one of the first rags in 1895, and whose importance seems to derive as much from his girth (to which the authors allude no less than three times) and imposing personality as from his compositional or pianistic abilities. The authors are quick to admit that ragtime is *not* jazz, and as a music thus largely outside the scope of the book, perhaps they felt justified in neglecting any meaningful engagement with the music itself. Certainly, in a book devoted largely to critical reviews of recordings, the authors were hampered by the fact that, in 1942, there existed virtually no commercial solo piano recordings of the “pianistic ragtime” that flourished in the Midwest of the 1890s and early 1900s. What the entry achieves, in lieu of musical analysis, is to position ragtime as an exotic, distant music bound inseparably to its origins in the environs of St. Louis. The authors hint at the music’s charms, but the reader senses that ragtime is worthy of study chiefly as a fertile source of colorful characters and ribald anecdotes, best viewed through the lens of wistful nostalgia.

### 2.3.2 Charles Payne Rogers: “Ragtime” (1942)

Coincident with the publication of *The Jazz Record Book*, one of the book’s authors, Charles Payne Rogers, contributed an article titled “Ragtime” to the similarly straightforwardly named magazine *Jazz*.<sup>50</sup> While repeating some of the same lore and basic premises as the book entry, Rogers’s article differs from the *Jazz Record Book* in the following notable ways:

1. Rogers now specifies a date range during which “the body of ragtime was published”: 1898-1917.
2. The role of music publishers is subtly suggested through quotation of their advertisements, even if the publishers remain unnamed.
3. Louis Chauvin, while still acknowledged as an important pianist, is replaced by James Scott in a listing of the three most important ragtime composers (along with Turpin and Joplin). Arthur Marshall, absent from the *Jazz Record Book*, receives brief mention and is lauded for his rag “Kinklets.”
4. More attention is paid to musical analysis. Rogers contends that ragtime “is a *treatment*, a way of feeling tone,” and he cites specifically right-hand syncopated

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<sup>50</sup> My source for Rogers’s article is a facsimile of pages from the 15 December 1944 issue of *Jazz* appearing in the March 1963 issue of the Ragtime Society’s newsletter. Although the 15 December issue of *Jazz* carried the designation “Volume 1, Issue 1,” it was, in fact, a revival of Thiele’s own magazine of the same name that had printed a few issues between 1939 and 1942 before halting operations during World War II. While I have been unable to locate copies of the earlier *Jazz* magazine for review, a prefatory remark to the 1944 reprint of “Ragtime” suggests that the article was published originally in the earlier incarnation of *Jazz*, and Nancy Ping Robbins, in *Scott Joplin: A Guide to Research* references an original publication date of June 1942.

figures over a “march rhythm” in the left hand, the latter peculiar to rag in its “employment of octaves and chords.” The second half of the article is dedicated to a thorough examination of Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag.”

Despite references to and comments on several rags by Joplin and Scott that were still unrecorded on phonograph records in 1942, as with *The Jazz Record Book*, Rogers focuses on and remains primarily informed by commercially-issued recordings and a few piano rolls; consequently, although he again cautions his reader that “ragtime is not to be confused with jazz,” his discussion of piano ragtime gravitates towards those pianists whose works (often “rags” in name only) appeared on disc records in the 1920s and early 1930s: Will Ezell, Frank Melrose, James P. Johnson, Bennie Moten, Earl Hines, Cow Cow Davenport, Jelly Roll Morton, and Clarence Williams—pianists now more commonly regarded as jazz musicians. While not explicitly acknowledged, the importance Rogers assigns to Joplin, Scott, and Turpin (and the continued omission of Joseph Lamb) seems due, at least in part, to the relative preponderance of recordings then available of their works.<sup>51</sup> Tom Turpin’s “St. Louis Rag” and “Buffalo Rag” had been recorded multiple times each on Victor and Columbia records between 1904 and 1909,<sup>52</sup> and Joplin’s “Maple Leaf

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<sup>51</sup> To my knowledge, the only commercially issued recording of a Joseph Lamb composition prior to 1942 was a jazz arrangement of “Ragtime Nightingale” recorded by the Indiana-based Hitch’s Happy Harmonists in 1924 under the title “Nightingale Rag Blues” (Gennett 5633). Rick Kennedy, in *Jelly Roll, Bix, and Hoagy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), suggests that Hitch’s group may have recorded the selection to help promote the Chicago-based Melrose Brothers Music Company which was then issuing “stock” arrangements of piano rags. Like most of Gennett’s jazz issues, the record received poor distribution and is rather scarce today. In the absence of any 78 rpm reissues of the title prior to 1942, it is unlikely that Rogers would have heard it.

<sup>52</sup> Discography of American Historical Recordings. Accessed 13 May 2015. <http://adp.library.ucsb.edu>. Vess L. Ossman’s 1909 recording of “Buffalo Rag” remained in Victor’s catalogue until 1925.

Rag” had already been recorded at least 27 times by 1942.<sup>53</sup> Rogers suggests that a then recent (1939) recording of James Scott’s “Climax Rag” by Jelly Roll Morton’s Jazzmen on the widely-distributed Bluebird label is alone responsible for rescuing Scott from an “oblivion his talent does not merit.”

### 2.3.3 Charles Wilford: “Ragtime—An Excavation” (1944)

After brusquely acknowledging the *Jazz Record Book*’s “pathetic attempts to deal with Ragtime,” British author Charles Wilford endeavored to provide a more thorough musical analysis of ragtime style and form in his own four-page article, “Ragtime—An Excavation,” published in the 1945 compendium *Piano Jazz* (Issue No. 2).<sup>54</sup> Like Rogers *et al.*, Wilford—a jazz critic and host of the BBC’s *Radio Rhythm Club*—seems to have been interested in ragtime primarily as a precursor to jazz, and despite dismissing them as “pathetic,” he nevertheless appears to owe much to the efforts of Rogers and his cohorts. Where Rogers *et al.* hint at the existence and legitimacy of a variety of ragtime forms through repeated invocations of the specifying term “*pianistic* ragtime” (emphasis mine), their subtlety is lost upon Wilford. He interprets their piano-centric discussion to mean that “rag-time is strictly piano music...and can neither be sung nor orchestrated,” which he matter-of-factly declares to be one of the music’s two defining axioms, the other being that “the ragtime period coincided roughly with the 1900 to 1910 decade, and no pure

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<sup>53</sup> Brian Rust, *Song Title Index to Jazz and Ragtime Records (1897-1942)*, ed. Malcolm Shaw (Denver, CO: Mainspring Press, 2002), 68.

<sup>54</sup> Although Wilford’s article was published in 1945, a parenthetical note in the article’s fourth paragraph indicates that it was written in 1944.

ragtime was produced outside this period."<sup>55</sup> Thus, Wilford dismisses as misguided aberrations any band recordings of ragtime, omits any mention of the hundreds of published ragtime songs, and also discounts what he refers to as the "so-called rags" of early jazz pianists like Rube Bloom, Frank Signorelli, and Arthur Schutt.

Based on his analysis of two rags reprinted in the October and November 1943 issues of *Record Changer* magazine ("Weeping Willow" by Scott Joplin and "Cotton Bolls" by Chas. Hunter, respectively), some rags of George Botsford and Henry Lodge, and several additional Joplin rags that he studied at the British Museum, Wilford arrives at a concise description of piano rags that observes conventions of form (2/4 time, 16-bar strains, right-hand syncopations over "regular" beats in the left, etc.), harmony (a "straightforward tonic-dominant structure" with a "very great" use of diminished chords), and melody. In reasserting Tom Turpin, Louis Chauvin, James Scott, and Scott Joplin as the foremost ragtime pianist-composers (as Rogers had done), Wilford notes their use of rhythmic variety and attention to melody; lesser rag composers, he claims, had a tendency to "abandon melody altogether, and...descend to... riffing."<sup>56</sup>

Like both Rogers's article and the *Jazz Record Book*, Wilford surmises that Chauvin was a significant influence on Scott Joplin. While Joplin and Chauvin's "Heliotrope Bouquet" (1907) was published under both composers' names and remains their only verified collaboration,<sup>57</sup> Rogers curiously attributes Joplin's "Original Rags" (1899) of nearly a decade earlier to ideas borrowed from Chauvin. Rogers had interpreted the

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<sup>55</sup> Charles Wilford, "Ragtime - An Excavation," *Piano Jazz* 2 (1945): 9.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>57</sup> Edward A. Berlin, *King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 156.

cover's somewhat cryptic note that the piece was "picked by Scott Joplin" to mean that Joplin acted as little more than a conduit—an "amanuensis"—for another composer whom he supposes, without evidence, to have been Chauvin. Wilford, writing three years later, latches onto the suggestion, hypothesizing that "Joplin got *many* of his ideas from the playing of Chauvin" [emphasis mine], though he admits that the only real evidence in support of his theory is the existence of "Heliotrope Bouquet," which he incorrectly dates to 1903 and considers to be typical of Joplin's output. (Writing nearly fifty years after Wilford, Edward A. Berlin would note that, in fact, "Heliotrope Bouquet" "is quite unlike anything [else] composed by Joplin."<sup>58</sup>) Aside from the comments on Joplin and Chauvin, Wilford's article is notable for his mention of Arthur Marshall as an important composer, as well as his recognition of John Stark's publishing business as perhaps the most important "rag house." Although he names Joplin, Scott, Marshall, and other composers affiliated with Stark, Joseph Lamb (who published rags exclusively with Stark during the ragtime era) remains conspicuously absent.

Despite the occasional disparaging remark levied against ragtime—including the curiously paradoxical suggestion that the music belongs to the "lesser pianist who can read it with an instinct for the correct beat"<sup>59</sup>—Wilford is genuine in lamenting ragtime's obscurity at the time, for he finds it to be "worth preserving for posterity."<sup>60</sup> He is perhaps the earliest writer from the budding revival to suggest a kinship with classical music, declaring that ragtime "has at its best a permanent musical worth, the same perfection in miniature that is to be found in a minuet by a minor composer of the eighteenth

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Wilford, 9.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.



century.”<sup>61</sup> He seems to have been similarly historically-minded when titling his essay, for just as the Pharaoh Tutankhamun had languished in relative obscurity until the discovery and excavation of his tomb in 1922 sparked a wave of popular interest in Ancient Egypt, Wilford’s archeologically-inspired title presaged a mini-explosion of ragtime interest in the mid-to-late 1940s—at least among traditional jazz initiates. Although Wilford freely admitted to not having heard a “genuine rag” himself until the year before publishing his article, musically speaking, he had not been living under the proverbial rock, nor did he owe his understanding of ragtime exclusively to the writings of Charles Payne Rogers or to his own limited experience with ragtime sheet music obtainable in England. His reference to the 1943 *Record Changer* reprints of “Weeping Willow” and “Cotton Bolls” suggests that he may have been a subscriber to that magazine or at least a regular reader. By the time of Wilford’s article, *The Record Changer* was already on its way to becoming one of the driving forces in the 1940s ragtime revival.

#### **2.3.4 *The Record Changer* (1942-1957)**

While Rogers’s and Wilford’s articles appeared in small periodicals with relatively poor circulation, other writings on ragtime by William Russell, Roy J. Carew, Don E. Fowler, and Brun Campbell were reaching a larger audience through the pages of *The Record Changer* magazine. The resurgence of interest in “traditional” jazz beginning in the late 1930s—particularly among a coterie of young, white, middle class record collectors—had

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

spawned a handful of jazz-focused periodicals that included the *H.R.S. [Hot Record Society] Rag*, *Jazz Information*, *Jazz*, *The Jazz Quarterly*, *The Jazz Record*, *The Needle*, *The Jazz Session*, *American Jazz Review*, *Index to Jazz*, and *The Record Changer*. While most were short-lived (many apparently succumbed to paper or personnel shortages during World War II), *The Record Changer* persisted for fifteen years and by 1947 boasted 3,300 subscribers.<sup>62</sup> What began as a humble marketplace for the buying and selling of jazz records became a forum for the semi-scholarly discussion of jazz, its origins, and related music styles, with contributors that included Alan Merriam, Marshall Stearns, Ernest Borneman, George Avakian, Hugues Panassié, Rudi Blesh, and others.

Billed as “The only record exchange in the world,” *The Record Changer* was published monthly beginning in mid-1942 by Gordon Gullickson, a government economist and avid jazz record collector based in Washington, D.C. On weekends, Gullickson often traveled up and down the east coast in search of out-of-print records for his collection, meeting along the way other collectors equally eager to buy or trade old records, but with no centralized platform to do so.<sup>63</sup> With no prior publishing experience, Gullickson began producing *The Record Changer* from his home on 25th Street in Washington, D.C. As the name implied, *The Record Changer’s* primary purpose was to facilitate the buying, selling, and trading of jazz records among collectors; for ten cents per line or \$9.00 per page, subscribers bought space to advertise their lists of records wanted or for sale. A survey of the “wanted” and “for disposition” lists in the magazine’s first few years indicates that its readers most actively sought and traded blues, jazz, and

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<sup>62</sup> “An Economist in Business,” *Kiplinger Magazine*, November 1947, 13.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

jazz-inspired “hot” records of the 1920s and 1930s: discs by Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Johnny Dodds, Bix Beiderbecke, Clarence Williams, Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, and others of their ilk feature prominently in many of the lists. A typical issue in the magazine’s first two years might see 80-100 individual participants advertising their “wants” or records for sale, and record labels large and small (e.g., Brunswick, Columbia, Jazz Information, Blue Note, S.D. Records, etc.) regularly advertised their jazz-related reissues and new releases in the magazine.

While the first issues received limited circulation and were devoted almost entirely to the classified ads that constituted the magazine’s ostensible *raison d’être*, by the summer of 1943, Gullickson—then serving an estimated 500 subscribers—had begun inserting short articles by a small handful of noted record producers, critics, and writers that included Nesuhi Ertegun (then also living in Washington, D.C.), Eugene Williams, William C. Love, William Russell (one of the *Jazz Record Book’s* co-authors), and Roy J. Carew.<sup>64</sup> With the exception of Carew’s monthly column, “New Orleans Recollections,” in which he reminisced about his musical encounters and experiences while working and living in New Orleans in the 1900s and 1910s, early *Record Changer* articles and columns dealt almost exclusively with topics closely related to record collecting (e.g., record grading, packing, discographical details, and safe trading practices) or discussions of musical style. Attempts to define and categorize types of jazz seem to have been of particular interest to the *Record Changer’s* contributors, dominating much of the discourse in the 1943 issues. At first, such discussions amounted to little more than back-and-forth

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<sup>64</sup> *The Record Changer*, June 1943.

shouting matches between several highly opinionated contributors over what did or did not constitute jazz, but by 1944, the *Record Changer's* articles began to take on a more professional, scholarly tone. For the most part, however, the early *Record Changer* articles constituted a sort of benign nostalgia that validated readers' tastes for earlier forms of jazz—tastes that were otherwise widely ridiculed among the more avant-garde jazz critics and musicians—while also indulging a subtle yearning for a glorified pre-war lifestyle as well. Viewed collectively, the 1943 and early 1944 *Record Changer* articles seek to cultivate a thriving network of trustworthy, knowledgeable, collegial collectors beneficial to the magazine's bottom line and primary purpose. There is little that could be construed as any sort of "call to action"—either to revive performance of the music at the heart of *The Record Changer*, or encourage significant further research—at least not explicitly. Subtly and unintentionally, however, seeds were sown that would transform the *Record Changer* into one of the preeminent forums for early jazz scholarship in the 1940s, with prominent discussion of the "roots of jazz"—including ragtime.

The *Record Changer's* first tentative forays into ragtime came in late 1943 when—with little fanfare or explanation—the October edition included a facsimile reprint of Scott Joplin's 1903 rag "Weeping Willow" in its entirety, reproduced from original sheet music. Elsewhere in the same issue, Roy Carew's "New Orleans Recollections" column had mentioned several early ragtime compositions and his own efforts—in 1904—to obtain the sheet music for Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag." Presumably, the "Weeping Willow" insert was intended as an illustrative complement to Carew's article. By way of introduction, Gullickson writes only: "The composer of *Maple Leaf* and many other fine rags, Scott

Joplin was one of the best and most prolific ragtime writers of that time. If you don't play the piano yourself, take this music to someone who can and have him stomp it off for you with a nice one-two beat."<sup>65</sup> Not only was it the first time the *Record Changer* had ventured to include a sheet music reprint, but by extension, it represented the first direct invitation to its readers to take a more *participatory* role in recreating the music under discussion. (Nearly two decades later, a critical component in the ragtime revival's success would be its attraction as a "do-it-yourself" music in which amateur pianists of modest ability could participate.) The November 1943 *Record Changer* reported that reader response to "Weeping Willow" had been favorable, and that month, the magazine reprinted Chas. Hunter's "Cotton Bolls" (1901).<sup>66</sup> No rag reprints appeared in the ensuing December or January editions, but the February 1944 issue featured a reprint of Tom Turpin's "Rag-Time Nightmare" (1900) alongside a short biographical sketch of Turpin by William Russell—apparently a re-working of the Turpin discussion in the 1942 *Jazz Record Book*. Thereafter, reprints of complete ragtime scores in the *Record Changer* abated without explanation. Perhaps legal challenges and murky copyright status prevented their publication. Whatever the reason, it does not seem to have been the result of an apathetic response, for the reprints heralded expanding ragtime coverage in the months that followed.

In three installments from September to December 1944, *The Record Changer* published the first substantial biography of Scott Joplin. Written by Roy Carew and Don Fowler and straightforwardly titled "Scott Joplin—Overlooked Genius," the 6,200-word

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<sup>65</sup> "Lemme Take This Chorus," *The Record Changer*, October 1943, 21.

<sup>66</sup> "Lemme Take This Chorus," *The Record Changer*, November 1943, 35.

article presents a startlingly vivid and remarkably accurate birth-to-death account of Joplin's life and career (as borne out by later scholars' research). Along the way, Carew and Fowler draw on their own extensive sheet music collections to discuss nearly all of Joplin's published compositions, mentioning each by name and offering a short assessment of the work's quality and defining musical characteristics; in so doing, they provide what is likely the first comprehensive, annotated listing of Joplin's works. Besides establishing Joplin as the "greatest" of all ragtime composers—"standing head and shoulders above all others"<sup>67</sup>—Carew and Fowler's article is notable for its eloquent appeal to jazz fans to consider ragtime more carefully. Like others before them, they argue for its study as a "fundamental" component in the development of jazz, but they also entreat readers to consider ragtime on its own intrinsic merits. Ragtime's relative obscurity in the New Orleans jazz revival to that point, they claimed, could not simply be ascribed to musical deficiencies (as some writers had claimed), but rather it had more to do with the tendency of surviving parent tradition jazz musicians to stress their own historical importance in interviews—with a corresponding absence of any ragtime era composers and pianists to advocate on its behalf.

### **2.3.5 The writings of Brun Campbell (1944-1951)**

Even as Carew and Fowler publicly lamented the void in ragtime leadership, Carew was working behind the scenes to cultivate such a figurehead for the movement. Sometime

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<sup>67</sup> Roy Carew and Don E. Fowler, "Scott Joplin—Overlooked Genius," *The Record Changer*, September 1944, 13.

shortly before publication of “Scott Joplin—Overlooked Genius,” Carew had become aware of a barber in Venice, California who was attracting local attention as a disciple of Joplin and promoter of his music: Sanford Brunson Campbell.<sup>68</sup> As a teenager at the turn of the century, “Brun” Campbell had been an itinerant pianist in the Midwest, where he plied his trade “in Honky Tonks, on steam boats, in Barrel Houses, Notch Houses, theatres, and about every place a pianist could play” before marrying and moving to California, where he devoted himself to barbering.<sup>69</sup>

One evening in early January 1943, while listening to Hal Nichols’s popular KFOX nostalgia radio program *Hal’s Memory Room*, Campbell heard Nichols play a recording of “Maple Leaf Rag.” Displeased with the performance, Campbell wrote to Nichols, introducing himself as personal friend and student of Joplin’s and thus in a position to know how the rag *should* be played. Campbell later maintained that Joplin had taught him to play “Maple Leaf Rag” even before the piece’s initial publication, making him the “first white pianist to play it.”<sup>70</sup> Campbell and Nichols quickly discovered a mutual affinity for ragtime and began a friendly correspondence during which Nichols encouraged Campbell to reacquaint the world with Joplin’s genius since “nowadays it’s indeed hard to find anyone who knows the history of Ragtime, not alone playing it as it should be played.”<sup>71</sup> Somehow, word of Campbell reached Carew in Washington, D.C., and on 21 September

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<sup>68</sup> For many of the details of Brun Campbell’s life and work, I am indebted to Campbell’s biographer, Larry Karp, who graciously shared with me information from his forthcoming book *Brun Campbell: The Original Ragtime Kid* to be published in 2016 by McFarland.

<sup>69</sup> Brun Campbell, “Ragtime (Silk Stockings, Short Skirts, Silk Blouses, and Velvet Jackets),” *Jazz Journal* 2, April 1949, 9-10.

<sup>70</sup> The unadorned typeset label for Brun Campbell’s self-produced 78 rpm record of himself playing “Maple Leaf Rag” (c. 1948) reads: “MEMORIAL / MAPLE LEAF RAG - 1899 / SCOTT JOPLIN (colored) / Played by Brun Campbell as taught him by Scott Joplin in 1899 - first white pianist to play it.” (See Figure 2.01.)

<sup>71</sup> Hal Nichols, letter to Brun Campbell, 11 January 1943. From the collection of Larry Karp.

1944, he sent Campbell a copy of his newly-published “Scott Joplin—Overlooked Genius” article with the note that “[y]ou must know a great deal about Joplin’s early days, and I believe it would be of interest to the RECORD CHANGER’s readers if you would give them the benefit of your knowledge.”<sup>72</sup> Inspired by the words of encouragement from Nichols, Carew, and likely others as well, Campbell dedicated the remainder of his life to championing ragtime (and Joplin in particular) as pianist, composer, and author. Though he had published no original compositions as a youth, beginning in the mid-1940s Campbell composed and recorded a handful of his own original rags (several of which are still regularly performed by ragtime pianists in 2015), and from 1945 until his death in 1952, he authored or co-authored more than a half-dozen ragtime articles for *The Record Changer* and *Britain’s Jazz Journal*.



**Figure 2.1 Brun Campbell’s 78 rpm recording of “Maple Leaf Rag” (c. 1948)**

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<sup>72</sup> Roy Carew, letter to Brun Campbell, 21 September 1944. From the collection of Larry Karp.



Following Carew's advice to "get together more information about Sedalia, about Joplin and Otis Saunders, and any other players there...[and] little interesting items about the early days,"<sup>73</sup> in most of his articles, Campbell acts more as raconteur than reliable historian, stringing together anecdotal accounts of his own musical experiences with a generous dose of ragtime hearsay. His penchant for embellishment has caused subsequent scholars to question his reliability; and if his overbearing efforts at self-promotion made him a target of ridicule, they may have stemmed in part from Carew and Fowler's *Record Changer* comment that "[o]ne reason why the early ragtime composers and players have not been written up more fully may well be that they lived more or less in obscurity, played in questionable surroundings as a rule, and...[had] no publicity agents to 'discover' them and build them up for the personal aggrandizement of the agent."<sup>74</sup> Campbell would have understood that, within the broader context of their article, Carew and Fowler were suggesting that ragtime needed a spokesperson (or several spokespeople)—and that any parent tradition ragtime pianist who would speak to his own accomplishments and merit would also do service to the revitalization and restoration of ragtime in general. Excerpts from his semi-autobiographical article of April 1949 "Ragtime (Silk Stockings, Short Skirts, Silk Blouses, and Velvet Jackets)" in *Jazz Journal* serve to illustrate the ways in which Campbell sought to promote the greater cause of ragtime and its notable composers—most of whom were deceased, and thus unable to speak for themselves—while seeking to establish his own authority and reputation by association:

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<sup>73</sup> Roy Carew, letter to Brun Campbell, 4 October 1944. From the collection of Larry Karp.

<sup>74</sup> Carew and Fowler, 13.

When I was about 15, Scott Joplin taught me to play his first rags from pen and ink manuscripts. I was the first white pianist to play his "Maple Leaf Rag," and I pioneered the playing of Joplin's rags all through the Mid-West, and was one of the best-known of the early ragtime pianists... I knew every Negro pianist of the early days, like Otis Saunders (Joplin's pal), Scott Joplin, Tom Turpin, Owen Marshall, Sam Patterson, Louis Chauvin, Arthur Marshall, Al John, Scott Hayden, James Scott, and others I can't remember... I am the only white ragtime pianist alive who was connected with the Negro greats of ragtime... The music these great Negro composers developed will live for ever [sic], and I am proud of the fact that I was associated with them at the beginning.<sup>75</sup>

Of course, Campbell also had his own commercial interests at heart. With no professional agent behind him, Campbell assumed the position for himself. Beginning in 1945 and continuing through at least 1948, he financed and recorded (with himself at piano) a series of ragtime 78 rpm records on his own "Brun" label that he sold wherever he could.<sup>76</sup> And although he appeared grateful for the attention and adulation his ragtime articles and recordings brought him, following publication of *They All Played Ragtime*, he became aware of the potential commercial value attached to his memories and collected data, and he became shrewdly business-like in what details he would divulge for free. When Mike Montgomery, a young ragtime enthusiast, pressed him for historical details in a 1951 letter, Campbell replied "[t]he information you ask me for, I can only give you some of it, for some of the points are copyrighted."<sup>77</sup>

Whatever qualms one may have with Brun Campbell's assessment of his own historical importance or the veracity of his historical accounts, Campbell was

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<sup>75</sup> "Ragtime (Silk Stockings, Short Skirts, Silk Blouses, and Velvet Jackets)," 9-10.

<sup>76</sup> Original transactional receipts and invoices in the collection of Larry Karp detail the recording and pressing costs of Brun Campbell's "vanity" 78 rpm records and also provide accurate dates for the releases. In the April 1947 edition of *The Record Changer*, reviewer John Lucas praised Campbell's rendition of "Maple Leaf Rag" as "one of the choicest examples of hot piano now available."

<sup>77</sup> Brun Campbell, letter to Mike Montgomery, January 1951. Reprinted in *The Ragtimer*, April 1963, 2.

instrumental—especially through his *Record Changer* articles—in directing revival discourse away from a teleological assessment of ragtime as a mere stepping stone to jazz and towards serious consideration as a separate musical entity. In his earliest articles, he systematically avoided comparisons with jazz, and very seldom made note of jazz musicians. Indeed, he rarely invoked the word “jazz” at all. Only in his later articles, as ragtime was already achieving distinction, did he capitulate somewhat.<sup>78</sup> He chose instead to reiterate the importance and “genius” of Scott Joplin and his musical colleagues. However much others may have discussed ragtime in terms of what it bequeathed to jazz, Campbell was determined to see ragtime accorded its due for its own sake.

One of the primary ways in which Campbell sought to distance ragtime from jazz and establish its legitimacy on its own terms was through a discussion of the music’s geographic origins—specifically, its *Midwest* origins. While such writers as Charles Payne Roges and William Russell had previously cited St. Louis as a hotbed of ragtime activity early in the music’s history, many in the traditional jazz revival movement continued to seek evidence of ragtime’s beginnings in New Orleans.<sup>79</sup> Within a year or two of his 10 July 1941 death, New Orleans-born Jelly Roll Morton had come to be widely revered among traditional jazz revivalists, as letters to the editor, articles, and even advertisements for posthumous record releases published in *The Record Changer* and other magazines attest. For many, Morton represented the epitome of ragtime piano playing, and his December 1939 recording of Joplin’s “Original Rags” for the General label—rearranged in

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<sup>78</sup> In an article titled “Ragtime Begins” published in the March 1948 edition of *The Record Changer*, Campbell writes “I am happy that I sat on the sidelines and witnessed Scott Joplin’s fine ragtime music evolve into jazz.”

<sup>79</sup> “Ragtime (Silk Stockings, Short Skirts, Silk Blouses, and Velvet Jackets),” 9.

Morton's own style—was the piece's first commercial recording and likely the first exposure that most jazz revivalists had to solo piano ragtime on record. It is understandable, then, that when coupled with many revivalists' predilections for New Orleans jazz, Morton's influence may have led many to seek ragtime's own roots in the Crescent City.

Campbell's first article for *The Record Changer*—a tacit rebuking of those efforts—was not-so-subtly titled "Sedalia... Missouri, Cradle of Ragtime." He co-authored it with Roy Carew, and it appeared in two installments divided between the *Changer's* May and June 1945 issues.<sup>80</sup> In "Sedalia... Missouri," Campbell and Carew set out to establish that modest town as *the* focal point of ragtime's maturation from a rough, individualistic improvisatory music that flourished locally to a more polished, intricately composed genre ready for commodification and exportation to the rest of the country. In their discussion of Sedalia's history as a "train town," founded in tandem with the expansion of the Missouri-Kansas-Texas (MK&T) Railroad, they considered its role as a mercantile and cultural crossroads. Sedalia's stratified society and high proportion of transients were conducive to a thriving entertainment district that, in turn, proved attractive and occasionally lucrative for musicians. Though Campbell and Carew made no mention of New Orleans in their article, the pair apparently saw Sedalia as that city's smaller inland analogue, similarly ripe for cultivating a rich and unique musical style. Campbell and Carew realized that by

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<sup>80</sup> A stylistic comparison of the writing to be found in "Sedalia... Missouri, Cradle of Ragtime" with other articles that Carew and Campbell wrote individually leads me to believe that Carew was largely responsible for the text of the "Sedalia" article, but likely drawing on anecdotes and general memories that Campbell furnished.

establishing a ragtime “homeland” separate and distinct from New Orleans, they were helping the music to achieve a unique identity similarly separate and distinct from jazz.

Meanwhile, as other authors debated jazz’s racial connotations and the degree to which jazz could exist independent of the “Negro race,” Campbell sought further legitimacy for ragtime by emphasizing its similar inherent “blackness.” More than most other authors of ragtime articles, Campbell seems to have been compelled to identify the race of composers he discussed (e.g., “Porter King, a great Negro pianist,” “a Negro musician by the name of Wm. H Tyres,” “Louis [Chauvin] was the greatest of all the Negro ragtime pianists,” “Another Negro composer...of written ragtime was James Scott,” etc.).<sup>81</sup> While a modern reader might be tempted to assign Campbell’s “Negro” descriptors to an overt, institutionalized racism all-too-common at the time that was flattering to neither Campbell nor his subjects, Campbell likely specified his subjects’ race in an attempt to appeal more strongly to his target audience. Articles in *The Record Changer* and other traditional jazz revival publications reveal that, among their overwhelmingly white readership, there existed the widely held (but far from unanimous) belief that the exalted, “real” traditional jazz was the exclusive domain of “Negroes.” Campbell’s repeated invocation of the term “Negro” could almost be seen as an honorific meant to bestow artistic legitimacy and musical authenticity to his subjects—at least in the eyes of his readers. A letter from Carew to Campbell dated 4 October 1944 would seem to bear this out, as Carew notes that the readers of *The Record Changer* “can be interested in early

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<sup>81</sup> “Ragtime (Silk Stockings, Short Skirts, Silk Blouses, and Velvet Jackets),” 9-10.

ragtime players, particularly negroes."<sup>82</sup> Almost as if his own race might undermine his aspirations to a position of authority among ragtime and jazz revivalists, Campbell was often quick to associate himself with the "Negro" ragtime pianists: "I am very proud of the fact that I could call these Negro musicians my friends, and to recall that I was the first white ragtime pianist, pioneering with the Negro rag men in those early ragtime days."<sup>83</sup> On record labels and in promotional materials, Campbell billed himself widely as "Scott Joplin's only white pupil." The implication was that although Campbell himself was white, his studies with the greatest "Negro" ragtime composer had made him the recipient of uniquely "Negro" knowledge, techniques, and *feeling* when playing and composing ragtime.

### **2.3.6 A summary of writings about ragtime in the 1940s**

While not an exhaustive survey of the 1940s ragtime literature, the writings discussed thus far comprise a representative sampling of the kinds of texts that were circulating early in the ragtime revival. Most were relatively brief, based on an individual's own experiences or collected hearsay, and saw publication as chapters or articles in books or magazines otherwise devoted primarily to jazz (and to "traditional" jazz in particular). Despite the efforts of writers like Roy Carew and Brun Campbell to distance ragtime from jazz with the goal of establishing it as a separate and fully-formed genre, they faced a backlash from writers like Ernest Borneman, who wrote that "by any rational standard that transcends

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<sup>82</sup> Roy Carew, letter to Brun Campbell, 4 October 1944. From the collection of Larry Karp.

<sup>83</sup> S. Brunson Campbell and R. J. Carew, "How I Became...A Pioneer Rag Man of the 1890's," *The Record Changer*, April 1947, 12.

personal taste I can't help admitting that ragtime is not a basic style, like New Orleans jazz or the blues, but an immature one which not only predates jazz in mere order of time but has in fact been superseded by both the jazz idiom and the blues which have integrated some of its elements and have left over only what seems in fact incapable of integration into the idiom."<sup>84</sup>

Although the majority of published ragtime composers had been white and a significant number had been women, revivalist writers of the 1940s championed the music's black, male composers almost exclusively—particularly those from Missouri. Scott Joplin was already widely regarded as the “best” of the ragtime composers although his works were largely inaccessible to all but the most avid sheet music collectors and pianists since few of his rags had been reprinted or recorded. Other composers mentioned and discussed frequently include Tom Turpin, Louis Chauvin, and James Scott; Joseph Lamb and Eubie Blake—two ragtime composers then still living who would come to personify the revival a decade or two later—are conspicuously absent from the 1940s discourse.

When David A. Jasen writes that a renewed interest in ragtime emerged first among musicians, only later to be taken up by critics and listeners, he ignores the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.<sup>85</sup> In assuming the paradigmatic precedence of a small number of records made in the early 1940s by pianist Wally Rose with a contingent from Lu Watters's Yerba Buena Jazz Band, he overlooks the considerable strides already being made by the critics and listeners, many of whom had served as the impetus for the

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<sup>84</sup> Ernest Borneman, “Questions and Answers,” *The Record Changer*, June 1947, 13.

<sup>85</sup> David A. Jasen, *Ragtime: An Encyclopedia, Discography, and Sheetography* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 206.

pioneering Watters band to fully embrace traditional jazz and ragtime in the first place.<sup>86</sup> Even as the mid-to-late 1940s saw the emergence of a number of young professional jazz revival pianists such as Rose, Johnny Wittwer, Ralph Sutton, Don Ewell, and Dick Wellstood who embraced ragtime, most of the published ragtime discourse continued to be aimed at record collectors or enthusiasts who were not necessarily musicians themselves. Few of the articles addressed performance technique, interpretation, musical analysis, or other topics in a way that assumed a readership actively engaged in performing the music. A successful, self-sustaining revival—especially one that aspired to a sense of community—would need many more players than the relative handful of professionals active in the 1940s. Nevertheless, in the years immediately before Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis had tasked themselves with telling the music’s story in book form, ragtime enthusiasts had reason to be hopeful for the success of the budding revival. As John Lucas, writing in *The Record Changer* in 1948, presciently observed: “[E]very sign points at present to a forthcoming revival of this early piano music,” adding the earnest hope “may the Ragtime renaissance bring...a realization of [its]...true worth.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> In an interview with Terry Waldo, Turk Murphy (trombonist with Lu Watters’s Yerba Buena Jazz Band) recalled that it was the band’s listeners who steered them away from the mainstream popular tunes they were regularly engaged to play. “[A]s it turned out, the audience that attached itself to the Watters band had decided for us. When we’d play popular tunes, they’d shout and get off the floor and make a big noise and complain about it bitterly. So it eventually came down to the fact that we were playing nothing but jazz, which is what we wanted to play in the first place, but we thought we’d have to take much longer to arrive at this point.” See Terry Waldo, *This Is Ragtime* (New York: Hawthorne, 1976), 134.

<sup>87</sup> John Lucas, “Ragtime Revival,” *The Record Changer*, December 1948, 8.



## 2.4 *THEY ALL PLAYED RAGTIME* (1950)

The most significant catalyst in the development of the ragtime revival was the book *They All Played Ragtime* by Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis. As the first book-length study of ragtime, it established many of the general precepts that would guide the revival in the decades that followed. Its importance as not only a historical resource, but as a driving force in the development of a revival and formation of a revival community was recognized within a dozen years of its 1950 publication. The first issue of *The RagTime Review* (January 1962) opened by observing that “[s]ince publication of the definitive history of ragtime, ‘THEY ALL PLAYED RAGTIME’ by Rudy Blesh [sic] and Harriet Janis, a great number of enthusiasts of this music have arisen.”<sup>88</sup> Similarly, the first issue of the Ragtime Society’s newsletter in February 1962 encouraged readers “[i]f you don’t have this book you should buy it at once. It is the only excellent history.”<sup>89</sup> Although its place within scholarship has since been eclipsed by more rigorous academic studies of ragtime, the book’s colorful language and compelling narrative established a ragtime cosmology-mythology, and for many in the ragtime community, it remains the music’s “bible.”<sup>90</sup> “Virtually everyone active in ragtime today was powerfully affected by this book,” declared *The Rag Times* in 1999.<sup>91</sup> Many—if not most—ragtimers recognize it and refer to

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<sup>88</sup> Trebor Tichenor and Russ Cassidy, *The RagTime Review*, January 1962, 1.

<sup>89</sup> *The Ragtimer*, February 1962, 1.

<sup>90</sup> The reference to *They All Played Ragtime* as a “bible” is not my own, rather, it is a common descriptor for the book in the ragtime community. See Charles Wilford’s article “Ragtime - The Astonishing Boom” from *Jazz Journal and Jazz & Blues*, May 1974, reprinted in *The Ragtimer*, September 1974: 5. See also page 2 of the December 1962 issue of *The Ragtimer*, where Jim Kinnear writes “We have frequently made reference to ‘the bible of ragtime,’ meaning, of course, Blesh and Janis’ magnificent compilation ‘They All Played Ragtime.’” In Terry Waldo’s *This is Ragtime* (p. 159), Waldo quotes pianist Lou Busch (a.k.a. “Joe ‘Fingers’ Carr”) as saying “*They All Played Ragtime*...was considered the bible on the subject.”

<sup>91</sup> “The Rudi Blesh Centennial,” *The Rag Times*, November 1999, 7.

it by its acronym alone, TAPR, which I will use in the following paragraphs for sake of brevity and convenience.

For his 1998 profile of Rudi Blesh in *The Mississippi Rag*, Max Morath solicited comments on Blesh and TAPR from sixteen notable ragtime performers, composers, scholars, and collectors, including William Bolcom, Butch Thompson, Ian Whitcomb, Joshua Rifkin, Edward A. Berlin, Terry Waldo, Mike Montgomery, Reginald Robinson, Richard Zimmerman, Trebor Tichenor, Paul Affeldt, and others. The published tributes ranged from wistful recollections of his generous personality by those who knew Blesh personally to near-argumentative assertions of TAPR's influence. "Only an idiot would consider that publication of Rudi Blesh's *They All Played Ragtime* as anything less than the catalyst for the healthy ragtime revival that's been going on for nearly 30 years now," wrote Affeldt.<sup>92</sup> Most recounted their own transformative experiences upon reading TAPR, either as neophytes for whom the book served as an introduction and ragtime primer, or as casual ragtime enthusiasts in whom the book instilled a new passion and consuming fascination for the music. "My own interest and zeal for ragtime came from one source — *They All Played Ragtime*," proclaimed Zimmerman.<sup>93</sup> "I got the book in 1956, and it changed my life forever... [m]ore than any other one thing, this book made ragtime my life work," wrote Tichenor.<sup>94</sup> Even younger ragtime revivalists born decades after TAPR's initial publication have drawn inspiration from it. Sixteen-year-old (in 1998) Neil Blaze responded to Morath's call saying "[b]efore I read the book, I thought of ragtime as being a bunch of honky-tonk crap being played on an out-of-tune piano. I didn't really care

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<sup>92</sup> Quoted in Max Morath, "Rudi Blesh: A Profile," *The Mississippi Rag* (November 1998): 32.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

much for it. But reading the Blesh and Janis book made me realize what ragtime really was—a serious and sophisticated musical art form. After that... I just fell in love with the music."<sup>95</sup>

TAPR was one of several artistic and literary collaborations between Blesh and Janis that ranged from a jointly run record label to books on modern and folk art (*Collage: Personalities, Concepts, Techniques* and *De Kooning*). The two met in San Francisco in 1943; Blesh was presenting a series of lectures and concerts on "Hot Jazz and Its Origin" for the San Francisco Museum of Art, and Janis, accompanying her 13-year-old actor son, Conrad, on a theatrical tour, happened to attend one of Blesh's programs. The two met at a party afterwards and began a lifelong friendship founded on their shared passion for art, early jazz, and writing.<sup>96</sup>

Their first major undertaking together was Circle Records, which they established in January 1946 to record New Orleans drummer Warren "Baby" Dodds. The label's name was suggested by Blesh and Janis's mutual friend, the Dadaist artist Marcel Duchamp, who reasoned that "Records are circles, and besides, no one can then call you squares"<sup>97</sup>—an allusion to the geometric insult then often levied against defenders of "traditional" jazz. Despite the challenges that faced independent record labels in the postwar years (ranging from shellac shortages to distribution difficulties to a musicians' union recording ban in 1948), Blesh and Janis kept Circle active for the next six years, boasting an artist roster that included Albert Nicholas, Tony Parenti, Wild Bill Davison,

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> For biographical information on Rudi Blesh, Harriet Janis, and their partnership, I am indebted to Max Morath and his article "Rudi Blesh: A Profile," published in the November 1998 issue of *The Mississippi Rag* (25-33).

<sup>97</sup> Max Morath, "Rudi Blesh," 28.

Bob Wilber, Bertha “Chippie” Hill, Lizzie Miles, Mary Lou Williams, and even young Conrad Janis. Ragtime-influenced pianists who recorded for Circle included Don Ewell, Dick Wellstood, Ralph Sutton, Eubie Blake, and James P. Johnson. Perhaps Circle’s most ambitious project was to publicly issue for the first time—in a monumental 24-record 78 rpm set—Alan Lomax’s 1938 Library of Congress interviews with Jelly Roll Morton. The Morton project was released in 1950, but it proved to be financially ruinous, and by 1952, the label lay dormant.

Meanwhile, Blesh had built upon his earlier San Francisco jazz lecture series to produce the book *Shining Trumpets* (1946). With it, the 1943 lecture-concert series, and a modest record label to his credit, he successfully pitched the idea of a weekly jazz radio program to executives at the Mutual Broadcasting System. As a sustaining feature (i.e., without commercial sponsorship), *This Is Jazz*, with Blesh as host, aired nationally from 18 January to 4 October 1947, presenting live performances by “all-star” groups that included Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, Muggsy Spanier, James P. Johnson, George Brunis, Art Hodes, Joe Sullivan, and others.<sup>98</sup> Years later, George H. Buck, Jr., would recall Blesh’s *This Is Jazz* program as the spark that ignited his own interest in early jazz, leading to his founding of the important Jazzology label and subsequent purchase and revival of Blesh’s dormant Circle label (albeit as an outlet primarily for “big band” recordings).<sup>99</sup>

Thus, Blesh was well accustomed to thinking, writing, and speaking about music when, in the summer of 1949, Harriet Janis suggested they write a book about ragtime.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Scott Yanow, *Jazz on Record: The First Sixty Years* (San Francisco: Backbeat, 2003), 322.

<sup>99</sup> Jon Pult, “George Buck at the Microphone,” *Jazzology Newsletter* (April 2014): i.

<sup>100</sup> John Hasse, “Rudi Blesh and the Ragtime Revivalists” in *Ragtime: Its History, Composers, and Music*, ed. John Hasse (New York: Schirmer, 1985), 181.

“It was Hansi’s [Harriet’s] idea,” Blesh said, adding that since “[t]here was no previous research to turn to... [w]e had to go from person to person and from place to place seeking people and interviewing them.”<sup>101</sup> The pair began their research at the Library of Congress, looking through ragtime sheet music and ephemera before traveling in the fall to Ohio, Missouri, New York, and elsewhere in search of surviving composers, musicians, and their families to interview. They began writing in December 1949 and turned in a completed manuscript to their publisher within two months.<sup>102</sup> The publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, put it into production immediately, and the book was released in October 1950.

Coincident with the book’s publication, Knopf sent a promotional 78 rpm record to nearly five hundred radio stations that featured a four-minute interview with Blesh and Janis on one side and a piano roll recording of Scott Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag” on the other.<sup>103</sup> Reading from prepared scripts, Blesh and Janis speak haltingly about ragtime’s pervasiveness a half-century earlier and about the music’s continued relevance in 1950. They reinforce the notion of a ragtime era (1890s-1900s), a ragtime “homeland” (Sedalia, Missouri), and seem at pains to remind listeners that TAPR is a “very human,” and very American *story*. Keenly aware that they are trying to sell the book to a general readership, they eschew even the most rudimentary discussion of musical analysis, instead impressing upon listeners that the story of ragtime is one replete with “colorful, adventurous” characters, excitement, and technical marvels such as the player piano. A transcription of the record is provided in Appendix B. Despite the unusual marketing ploy, Max Morath notes that the book caused only a “mild stir” at first, though over the subsequent two

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<sup>101</sup> Quoted in Max Morath, “Rudi Blesh: A Profile,” *The Mississippi Rag* (November 1998): 30.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>103</sup> “Knopf Uses Disks to Plug Blesh-Janis Opus,” *Billboard*, 21 October 1950, 18.

decades, mounting sales prompted three more editions (1959, 1966, and 1971).<sup>104</sup> Still, within months of the book's publication, Brun Campbell already noticed its effects. In a January 1951 letter to Michael Montgomery, he wrote: "Yes, I think Ragtime if all you youngsters will really take an interest in it and pass it on to the next generation will keep going, there is an awful upsurge of Ragtime all over the world. My mail tells me that."<sup>105</sup>

In discussing musical revival movements, Tamara Livingston, Amy Wooley, and others have written of the importance of "parent tradition" informants. Whether living or dead at the time of the revival (the latter may be represented by writings or audio or video recordings), these informants provide the sense of continuity between the parent tradition and its revival that gives the revival legitimacy. Beyond constructing a compelling narrative of the ragtime era, TAPR was responsible for "rediscovering" and presenting to the public several notable ragtime "parent tradition" pianist-composers then still living, most notably Joe Jordan, Arthur Marshall, and Joseph Lamb.

Prior to TAPR, the name of Joseph Lamb was virtually absent from all published ragtime discourse, his music largely unknown to ragtime enthusiasts, with even less known about the man himself (indeed, some in the 1940s speculated that "Joseph Lamb" may have been a pseudonym for Scott Joplin<sup>106</sup>). Carol Binkowski and other Joseph Lamb biographers have documented the circumstances under which Blesh and Janis, encouraged to seek him out by the quality of his Stark-published rags, found Lamb at his Brooklyn home in the autumn of 1949: a 62-year-old living comfortably, if simply, with

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<sup>104</sup> Max Morath, introduction to *100 Ragtime Classics* (Denver: DONN, 1963): II. *They All Played Ragtime* was also re-printed in England in 1960 as a pocket-sized edition by the Jazz Book Club. Though it sports a different cover, the 1960 printing is a facsimile of the 1950 first edition.

<sup>105</sup> Brun Campbell, letter to Michael Montgomery, January 1951. Reprinted in *The Ragtimer*, April 1963, 2.

<sup>106</sup> Carol Binkowski, *Joseph F. Lamb: A Passion for Ragtime* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 161.

his family on a quiet street. His days as a semi-professional composer long behind him, since 1914 Lamb had been working full-time for Dommerich & Co., an importer of textiles.<sup>107</sup> Music and composition had remained a hobby for Lamb, primarily as a restful evening pastime to be enjoyed in the privacy and comfort of his home. Unaware of the nascent ragtime revival, he was at first suspicious of the couple who showed up, unannounced, on his doorstep. “Mr. Blesh, how much is it going to cost me to get into your book?” he asked.<sup>108</sup> With publication of TAPR, Lamb became well known to ragtime enthusiasts, both for his talents as a composer and his historical connections to John Stark and Scott Joplin. Soon, young enthusiasts like Bob Darch, Samuel Charters, Michael Montgomery, Fred Hoepfner, and others sought Lamb out, visiting his home to interview him and make recordings of his playing, or corresponding with him by mail. As I will discuss in the next chapter, Bob Darch invited Lamb to perform in Toronto, helping to spark sufficient ragtime interest there for the formation of the Ragtime Society. Buoyed by his new celebrity, Lamb resumed composing ragtime in earnest, producing dozens of new rags before his death in 1960. While Lamb’s “rediscovery” and prolific later years may be among the most dramatic outcomes traceable directly to TAPR, the book was responsible for similar “rediscoveries” on a smaller scale.

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

## 2.5 THE “HONKY-TONK” MOVEMENT OF THE 1950s

*Breathe in deep: the air is stale, smoky and stimulating. At the far end of the room, a battered upright piano is swaying to the thumping rhythm... They called it Honky Tonk because it was the kind of music you heard in honky tonk joints in the early nineteen hundreds. The gashouse gang loved it, and the swells, too. It was the father, or maybe the bastard son, of Ragtime. It's great music. The men who play it here are old timers with limber fingers and long memories. They're happy because Honky Tonk is back. All America seems to be happy too.*

UNSIGNED LINER NOTES TO *HONKY-TONK RAGTIME*<sup>109</sup>

Even as *They All Played Ragtime* implored its readers to consider ragtime with a respect bordering on reverence as “the best form yet found for the instrumental expression of the complex and forceful multiple rhythms of the [Negro] race,” commercialization of traditional jazz and ragtime threatened to undermine Blesh and Janis’s efforts.<sup>110</sup> Though Blesh and Janis turned a deaf ear to Pee Wee Hunt’s 1948 recording of “Twelfth Street Rag” (Euday L. Bowman, 1914)—they did not mention it once—the public and major record companies had taken notice in a big way; on the occasion of Capitol Records’ tenth anniversary in 1952, *Billboard* ranked “Twelfth Street Rag” first in a list of “Capitol’s Top 25 Records” since the label’s inception.<sup>111</sup> Thirty years later, David Jasen looked back on it as an “epoch-making recording.”<sup>112</sup> Hunt’s tongue-in-cheek rendition, complete with “doo-wacka-doo” effects in the brass and a de-tuned piano solo played by Carl Fischer, had been made on a lark at the end of a session intended to produce selections for radio

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<sup>109</sup> *Honky-Tonk Piano*, Capitol CC-187, 1950. (78 rpm album set.)

<sup>110</sup> Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They All Played Ragtime* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), 13.

<sup>111</sup> “Capitol’s Top 25 Records 1942-1951,” *Billboard*, 2 August 1952, 68.

<sup>112</sup> David Jasen, liner notes to the LP *Late Band Ragtime* (New York: Folkways Records & Service Corp, 1979, RBF 39).



airplay only.<sup>113</sup> Overwhelming public response to airings of “Twelfth Street Rag” prompted Capitol to release the recording commercially, with estimates that it sold more than three million copies, making it—according to Jasen—“the biggest selling ragtime recording ever.”<sup>114</sup> Despite Hunt’s laudable credentials as a jazz trombonist—at Bix Beiderbecke’s suggestion, Jean Goldkette had hired him for his orchestra, and Hunt later held a 16-year post with the Casa Loma Orchestra<sup>115</sup>—the traditional jazz and ragtime cognoscenti widely snubbed Hunt’s “Twelfth Street Rag” as little more than kitsch.<sup>116</sup> Still, to a wider public that neither knew nor cared about the efforts of a relative few to restore “authentic” ragtime, Hunt’s novelty instrumental record represented a danceable, amiable change of pace from the vocal ballads that had come to dominate popular music in the years after World War II.<sup>117</sup>

Because of its swift and immense popularity, Hunt’s “Twelfth Street Rag” quickly established itself as the *de facto* ragtime exemplar for most, and record executives—particularly those at Capitol—seem to have been keen to repeat its success. A number of Capitol recordings by Hunt in a similar style soon followed (including Charles L. Johnson’s

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<sup>113</sup> In the late 1940s, it was still common for record labels and radio transcription companies to make special recordings exclusively for radio use, distributed to stations on 16-inch discs with no corresponding commercial issue, thereby satiating stations’ needs for “canned” music without de-valuing through over-saturation on the “free” medium of radio recordings marketed for public sale.

<sup>114</sup> Jasen, *Late Band Ragtime*.

<sup>115</sup> “The Hits and the Artists Who Made Them,” *Billboard*, 2 August 1952, 68.

<sup>116</sup> Twenty years after the release of Hunt’s “Twelfth Street Rag,” Jorgen Grunnet Jepsen still could not bring himself to list it or any of Hunt’s other Capitol recordings in his 11-volume discography *Jazz Records 1942-1962/9*. Under Pee Wee Hunt’s name, Jepsen’s disdain is only thinly veiled by his comment that “[t]he particular brand of pseudo-dixieland music played by this leader hardly belongs within the scope of this book.” See Jorgen Grunnet Jepsen, ed., *Jazz Records 1942-1967, Vol. 4b* (Copenhagen: Karl Emil Knudsen, 1969), 405.

<sup>117</sup> A look at *Billboard*’s 30 “Best-Selling Popular Retail Records” for the week ending 15 October 1948 shows Hunt’s “Twelfth Street Rag” sitting atop a list otherwise populated almost exclusively by the likes of Margaret Whiting, Doris Day, Dinah Shore, the Andrews Sisters, the Pied Pipers, Vaughn Monroe, Gordon MacRae, and Tony Martin. See *The Billboard*, 23 October 1948, 28.

1906 “Dill Pickles Rag”), and in early 1950, Capitol released what many have cited as the first piano ragtime album<sup>118</sup>—*Honky-Tonk Piano*—which the label marketed alongside Hunt’s records in advertisements. Accompanied by bass and drums, pianists Marvin Ash, Ray Turner, and Lou Busch (Capitol’s A&R man) each contributed two selections for the *Honky-Tonk* album, presenting a mélange of ragtime compositions from 1899 through 1950 in brisk, virtuosic arrangements.<sup>119</sup> Some of the recordings were sped up before final release, giving the music a bright, clipped timbre and enhancing the performers’ already impressive dexterity.<sup>120</sup> Busch played his selections on a percussive, deliberately de-tuned piano similar to the one heard in Hunt’s “Twelfth Street Rag,” providing the aural counterpart of the nostalgic barroom scene evoked in the liner notes: “The gal, slouching against the instrument, stares, spellbound, at the lightning dash up the keyboard, the swinging rhythm of the bass pounding out a beat as gay as pay day, as relentless as an aching heart. Who’s playin’? Feller named Joe. Buy him a beer, the guy’s good.” The painting on album’s cover (see Fig. 2.02) continued the liner notes’ barroom motif, and it established the visual trope that would dominate commercial ragtime and “honky-tonk piano” LP covers for nearly two decades: the white male pianist, with arm garters and a

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<sup>118</sup> Terry Waldo, *This Is Ragtime*, 158. See also Jasen’s *Ragtime: An Encyclopedia, Discography, and Sheetography*, 209.

<sup>119</sup> The original 10-inch LP of *Honky-Tonk Piano*, issued as Capitol H-188, included the following eight selections: (1) “The Entertainer’s Rag” (Jay Roberts, 1912) played by Ray Turner; (2) “Two Dollar Rag” (Lou Busch, 1950) played by “Professor” Lou Busch; (3) “Cannon Ball Rag” (Joseph Northup, 1905) played by Marvin Ash; (4) “Hungarian Rag” (Julius Lenzberg, 1913) played by Ray Turner; (5) “Maple Leaf Rag” (Scott Joplin, 1899) played by Marvin Ash; (6) “Kitten on the Keys” (Zez Confrey, 1921), played by “Professor” Lou Busch (7) “Jim Jams” (Roy Bargy, 1922) played by Ray Turner; (8) “That Ever Lovin’ Rag” (Walter Byron and David Gregory, 1950) played by “Professor” Lou Busch. Contemporaneous 45 rpm and 78 rpm issues omitted “Hungarian Rag” and “That Ever Lovin’ Rag.”

<sup>120</sup> Julius Lenzberg’s “Hungarian Rag,” though published in C major, appears on the *Honky-Tonk Piano* album in E-flat major. It is highly doubtful that pianist Ray Turner played it in E-flat; aural evidence suggests that Turner recorded it in the usual key of C and the resultant tape was then sped up to E-flat.

cigarette dangling from his lips, sits nonchalantly at a large upright piano, his hands on the keys and a stein of beer on the piano within reach; a *fille de joie* in revealing eveningwear leans against the side of the piano, seemingly enraptured by the music. As the liner notes for a later LP describe it: “It’s hardly polite, It’s definitely not delicate, It’s positively not for little old ladies...”<sup>121</sup>



**Figure 2.2 *Honky-Tonk Piano* (1950)**

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<sup>121</sup> Al “Spider” Dugan. *Please Don't Put Your Empties On The Piano*. (LP) Warner Bros. 1329, 1959.

*Honky-Tonk Piano* enjoyed moderate success, and it provided the blueprint for more than 350 additional “honky-tonk” ragtime LPs issued in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>122</sup> Record labels large and small issued “ragtime” LPs modeled closely on the aesthetics of Capitol’s album with derivative “copycat” covers and pianos that seemed ever more out-of-tune in the pursuit of “authenticity.”<sup>123</sup> While Capitol’s initial album took as its focus virtuosic classic and novelty rags originally conceived and published for the piano, many of the “honky-tonk” albums that followed in its wake eschewed the instrumental, technically-sophisticated, piano-centric ragtime repertoire in favor of more mundane piano-and-rhythm renditions of popular songs of the 1890s through the 1920s, some even reaching back to the music of Stephen Foster and his contemporaries or mixing in well-known melodies from “classical” repertoire. With so many public domain selections to provide grist for the commercial “honky-tonk” ragtime mill, and a simplified, formulaic arranging style that put few technical demands on musicians, producers of low-cost labels sold at gas stations, supermarket checkout lanes, and other “non-traditional” outlets were quick to embrace “honky-tonk” ragtime. Certain “star” performers received prominent billing on their record covers, labels, and in advertisements (e.g., Frankie Carle, Del Wood, Johnny Maddox, Jo Ann Castle, Frank Froeba), but often performers’ true identities were masked behind colorful pseudonyms such as Barrel Fingers Barry, Willie “The Rock” Knox, Crazy Otto, “Knuckles” O’Toole, Archibald Musciefingers, and Joe “Fingers” Carr

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<sup>122</sup> Bill Edwards has catalogued more than 350 “Honky-Tonk” ragtime piano LPs issued between 1950 and 1969 in a discography published on his website: <http://ragpiano.com/reclista.html> (accessed 29 August 2015).

<sup>123</sup> “The slightly-off-tune piano and the solid, rhythmic backing of the bass and drums are characteristic of a bygone age,” wrote Natt Hale in the liner notes to Frank Froeba’s 1956 LP ...*And I Never Took a Lesson in My Life* (ABC-Paramount ABC-108).

(Lou Busch's *nom-de-disque*) that went hand-in-hand with the "old-time saloon" ethos projected by the cover art. Terry Waldo has suggested that some of the pianists, who were otherwise versatile musicians, were fearful of being labeled "ragtime musician[s]." <sup>124</sup> In some cases, liner notes of "budget" label releases enticed potential buyers with promises that the pianists were, in fact, well-known, highly skilled musicians of great renown, moonlighting incognito for contractual purposes. Whether for contractual purposes or not, the suppression of performers' identities (and frequently composers' identities as well) coupled with the often garish covers evoking the "Gay '90s" on honky-tonk ragtime records suggest a fanciful ploy to appeal to a nostalgia-minded audience for whom the *songs* and the *style* were more important than the performer.

The honky-tonk ragtime movement was only one of several prominent musical revitalization movements in the 1950s that catered to a general public nostalgic for its past; others included the barbershop quartet singing revival, and a budding folk music revival. Michael Kammen has observed that "nostalgia is most likely to increase or become prominent in times of transition, in periods of cultural anxiety, or when a society feels a strong sense of discontinuity with its past." <sup>125</sup> Despite common twenty-first century portrayals of the 1950s in the United States as a decade of economic prosperity, optimism, and a sort of quiet, contented conservatism—in the words of Richard Fried: "a unique era that we think we know and often recall fondly" <sup>126</sup>—it was, J. Ronald Oakley reminds us, in reality "an age of great optimism along with the gnawing fear of doomsday bombs, of

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<sup>124</sup> Waldo, 177.

<sup>125</sup> Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 618.

<sup>126</sup> Richard M. Fried, "1950-1960" in *A Companion to 20th-Century America*, ed. Stephen J. Whitfield (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 71.

great poverty in the midst of unprecedented prosperity, and of flowery rhetoric about equality along with the practice of rampant racism and sexism.”<sup>127</sup> Against the backdrop of the Korean War, the Cold War, the Red Scare, and the mounting civil rights movement, Americans witnessed not only a rapid increase in population coupled with a shift in demographics, but also startling technological developments ranging from the first successful hydrogen bomb explosion over the Pacific on 1 November 1952 to the launch of Sputnik 1 on 4 October 1957.<sup>128</sup> Following the trauma of World War II, the social, political, and technological upheavals of the 1950s threatened to dissociate contemporary society from its past.

In such turbulent times, Blesh, Janis, and the traditional jazz revivalists were somewhat radical in demanding a reappraisal of ragtime that challenged its long-held stereotypes and instead celebrated largely unknown African-American composers as creators of a uniquely American “classical” music. If the white, middle class public was primed to accept a rose-tinted reimagining of its past, the narrative espoused by Blesh, Janis, and others like them was not immediately comfortable or familiar. Meanwhile, the honky-tonk movement appealed to mainstream audiences with the familiar image of the white saloon pianist in his bowler hat, arm garters, and handlebar mustache pounding out the “good old songs”—many of which were the same songs then championed by SPEBSQSA, the Society to Preserve and Encourage Barbershop Quartet Singing in America. Even as the “classic” and “honky-tonk” ragtime movements presented seemingly

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<sup>127</sup> J. Ronald Oakley, *God's Country: America in the Fifties* (New York: Dembner, 1990), x.

<sup>128</sup> Between 1945 and 1960, the population of the United States increased thirty percent (from 139.9 million to 180.6 million) and the non-white population increased by forty-one percent. See Martin Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 5.

opposite visions of what ragtime had been and could be, Lou Busch, who as “Joe ‘Fingers’ Carr” was one of honky-tonk ragtime’s most commercially successful performers, admitted to Terry Waldo that he was inspired and helped “a great deal” by *They All Played Ragtime*.<sup>129</sup> If not a conscious, deliberate rebuttal to *They All Played Ragtime*, the glut of musically uninspired “honky-tonk” ragtime performances (along with a few very good ones) on records and TV appropriated what ragtime interest had been mounting among the traditional jazz revivalists and repackaged it in caricature form for a general audience that seems to have appreciated the nostalgic “escape” it provided.

To those within the ragtime community, the 1950s’ “honky-tonk” ragtime movement presents an oft-debated point of contention. Some, like Terry Waldo, consider it a benign lapse of good taste: “[m]ost of us sophisticated, classic ragtime aficionados now turn up our noses at the corny ragtime that came out of those days [the 1950s].”<sup>130</sup> Others have tended to look upon it as a more malignant force, tarnishing and obscuring “real ragtime.” Paul Affeldt, publisher of *Jazz Report* magazine was especially outspoken in his disdain of the “riki-tick jokes with the bowler hats and big cigars whose oafish antics killed classic ragtime 45 years ago and who, like vultures, have been picking away at the bones ever since, preventing any serious resurrection.”<sup>131</sup> Still others, like David Jasen, tend to look on the honky-tonk movement of the 1950s favorably, citing it as a revival of ragtime “of the widest variety, the entire spectrum from Folk to Novelty.”<sup>132</sup> Jasen praises

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<sup>129</sup> Waldo, 159.

<sup>130</sup> Waldo, 158. Waldo’s comments, though written in 1976 at the height of the “classic” ragtime revival, remain widely applicable in 2015.

<sup>131</sup> Paul Affeldt, *Jazz Report*, January 1961. Reprinted in *The Rag Times*, January 1982, 2.

<sup>132</sup> David A. Jasen, *Ragtime: An Encyclopedia, Discography, and Sheetography* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 209.

the 1950s honky-tonk movement for encouraging the composition of new rags—“bright, fresh rags that evoked the golden age of ragtime while using modern harmonies.”<sup>133</sup>

## 2.6 SUMMARY

In this chapter, I have discussed the formation of a small but geographically diverse group of ragtime “core revivalists” in the 1940s and 1950s loosely connected through the pages of collector-oriented publications. I traced the re-emergence of two notable revival informants (S. Brun Campbell and Joseph Lamb), and analyzed the beginnings of a revivalist discourse in magazines that catered to “traditional” jazz enthusiasts and in the book *They All Played Ragtime*. Even as a wave of commercially successful “honky tonk” ragtime swept the country in tandem with a Dixieland jazz revival in the 1950s, those devoted to “classic ragtime” felt themselves increasingly isolated and marginalized. If a piano ragtime revival movement was still percolating in 1961, it lacked several key ingredients in Tamara Livingston’s “recipe” for music revivals: it had no clearly articulated ideology, no notable activities or organizations, and no “enterprises.” By 1961, both Campbell and Lamb had died, leaving the floundering movement in search of surviving “informants.” Copious original sources (including sheet music, piano rolls, and sound recordings) existed, yet they were largely unknown or inaccessible to all but the most dedicated enthusiasts. In the next chapter, I will discuss the efforts of ragtime revivalists in

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<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*



the early 1960s to organize themselves into a functional community through the establishment of several publications (*The RagTime Review*, *The Ragtimer*, and *The Rag Times*) and two major organizations (The Ragtime Society of Toronto, and the Maple Leaf Club of Los Angeles).

### 3.0 RAGTIME SOCIETIES IN THE 1960s

*Organization is one of the characteristics of people with a common interest, thus there are societies dedicated to the music of Bach, a music box society, a barbershop quartet society, a 5-string banjo fraternity, even one which deals with exclusive types of player pianos. It is thought by many that the time has come when it would be beneficial to form some sort of organization of those interest[ed] in ragtime in any of its phases, ie, performance, listening, sheet music, piano rolls, records, further research etc.*

RUSS CASSIDY AND TREBOR TICHENOR<sup>1</sup>

April 1961

In this chapter, I will discuss the three prominent “institutions” that emerged in the 1960s to promote “classic ragtime”: *The RagTime Review* (1962-1966), a publication produced in St. Louis by Russell Cassidy and Trebor Tichenor; the Ragtime Society of Canada and its publication *The Ragtimer* (1962-1986); and the Maple Leaf Club of Los Angeles and its newsletter *The Rag Times* (1967-2003). These three institutions represent the first major efforts of ragtime revivalists to mold themselves into a community; they provided the means by which many ragtime enthusiasts became acquainted personally, and they established forums through which they collected and disseminated music, recordings, and shared opinions and knowledge.

Livingston (1999, 2014), Juniper Hill (2014), Caroline Bithell (2014), Richard Blaustein (2014), and other scholars have noted the importance of proactive dissemination

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<sup>1</sup> Russ Cassidy and Trebor Tichenor, “Are We Ready for an International Ragtime Fraternity,” *Jazz Report*, April 1961, 11.

to the success and longevity of a musical revival movement. A revival movement must promote itself in a variety of ways both externally and internally to draw in, train, and retain new converts while bringing its musical output to a wider audience.<sup>2</sup> Hill and Bithell suggest that in many musical revival movements, such dissemination efforts begin among “revivalist-collectors,” and they cite specifically the song books published by early folk song collectors.<sup>3</sup> As they endeavor to collect, process, categorize, and re-distribute source materials related to a musical system, revivalist-collectors wittingly or unwittingly act as arbiters of the tradition, formalizing and standardizing modes of transmission while also filtering the source material they promulgate according to an individually-cultivated set of aesthetics and sense of “authenticity.”

Like many other popular musics, ragtime seems to have been especially conducive to collecting. It was an unabashedly “commercial” music from the start, and ragtime’s period of peak popularity coincided with the rise of such consumer-oriented products and musical technologies as inexpensive, mass-produced sheet music, the phonograph, and the player piano. Sheet music, records, and piano rolls produced in the ragtime era provided ample fodder for revivalist-collectors in the 1940s and 1950s. Blesh and Janis devoted the final sixty-three pages of *They All Played Ragtime* to listings of published rags and piano rolls, as well as discographies of ragtime disc and cylinder phonograph recordings, providing would-be collectors with a handy starting reference. Numerical catalogue numbers assigned by the issuing record and piano roll companies made taxonomy easier and more straightforward, facilitating more efficient and accurate source

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<sup>2</sup> Juniper Hill and Caroline Bithell, “An Introduction to Music Revival as Concept, Cultural Process, and Medium of Change,” in *Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*, 25.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

identification and discourse among collectors. Even where original source materials were rare, the ubiquitousness of Verifax and Xerox copiers as well as home tape recorders by the early 1960s made it possible for well-connected collectors to exchange copies among themselves.

I have already shown how the embryonic ragtime revival of the 1940s stemmed from a slightly earlier “traditional” jazz revival that had its origins among “hot” record collectors. In that revival movement, many of the early authorities were “revivalist-collectors”—critics and discographers such as Hugues Panassié and Charles Delaunay—who, through their publications, championed the music while also advocating for certain musicians and performance styles that most closely aligned with their own musical inclinations. That they catered primarily to other collectors is evident from books such as *Le Jazz Hot* (1934) and *The Jazz Record Book* (1942) and magazines such as *Jazz Information* (1939-1941) and *The Record Changer* (1943-1957). In many respects, the ragtime revival movement, as an entity separate from the traditional jazz revival, began in similar fashion, driven largely by the efforts of a relative few “revivalist-collectors” and self-proclaimed “ragophiles.”<sup>4</sup> Because changing American copyright laws in the 1960s affected the ways in which ragtime revivalist-collectors could legally share music and other source material among themselves, I will devote the first part of this chapter to a

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<sup>4</sup> Russ Cassidy and Trebor Tichenor, co-editors of *The RagTime Review* (1962-1966), seem to have been fond of using the term “ragophiles,” even if it was not widely adopted by the ragtime community after the publication’s demise.

discussion of copyright law, with particular attention to its implications for ragtime enthusiasts.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.1 SOURCE MATERIAL AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF CHANGING COPYRIGHT LAWS

*My decision to assemble and market this collection is my way of answering a question... "Where can I get some MUSIC?"*

MAX MORATH<sup>6</sup>

As Peter Narváez points out, a critical component in any revival movement is the availability of source material.<sup>7</sup> From the ragtime revival's earliest days, the general paucity of "period" recordings of piano ragtime coupled with a relatively small number of surviving first-hand "informants" meant that commercially-produced sheet music has constituted the bulk of the source material. As ragtime's popularity waned in the years after World War I, most rags fell out of print as publishers elected to retain only the most popular (such as Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" and Bowman's "Twelfth Street Rag") in their active catalogues. Paul Affeldt, writing in *Jazz Report* in January 1961, commented on the lack of ragtime still "in print": "The number of classic rags still available...in sheet music is

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<sup>5</sup> A colorful account tracing changes in U.S. Copyright law may be found in William Lichtenwanger's two-part article "94-553 and All That: Ruminations on Copyright Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow" which appeared in two issues of the Music Library Association's journal *Notes*. (Second Series, Vol. 35, No. 4, June 1979, pp. 803-818; Second Series Vol. 36, No. 4, June 1980, pp. 837-848.) See also Gillian B. Anderson, "Putting the Experience of the World at the Nation's Comman: Music at the Library of Congress, 1800-1917," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (1989): 108-149.

<sup>6</sup> Max Morath, introduction to *100 Ragtime Classics* (Denver: DONN, 1963): I-II.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Narváez, "Living Blues Journal: The Paradoxical Aesthetics of the Blues Revival." In *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, ed. Neil V. Rosenberg. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 244.

so limited as to be nearly non-existent.”<sup>8</sup> Although most ragtime sheet music had issued from publishers’ presses in runs of hundreds—if not thousands—of copies during the music’s heyday, the ephemeral nature of popular music and ease with which old, unwanted sheet music could be discarded meant that by the early 1960s, many ragtime compositions had become quite rare in their original published form. “If you’ve ever looked for originals, you know how tough they are to find” Max Morath noted in 1964.<sup>9</sup> “These items have been out of print for over 40 years and are just not available (as anyone who has spent time looking knows)” wrote Russ Cassidy and Tebor Tichenor in the October 1962 issue of *The RagTime Review*. Later that year, Jim Kinnear recalled the plight of a Mrs. Gilham, a piano teacher and graduate of the Royal Conservatory of Music, who “had gone to the music stores in Toronto, had written letters, had searched—all to find ragtime sheet music, and all in vain. Nobody had any, or knew where to obtain it.”<sup>10</sup> Collections of popular music at libraries or other institutions were few and far between; those that did exist were either poorly indexed or hampered by restricted access. Jazz critic Charles Wilford, in 1945, described the experience of trying to access ragtime sheet music at the British Museum, “the research worker’s favourite playground”:

I dropped the words Scott Joplin in the slot; the machine shied at the unusual demand, laboured, and finally brought forth a triumphant pile of some sixteen rags! All clean and shiny originals, with brightly-coloured period covers, and evidently untouched by the hand of man for forty years. I had before me now enough ragtime to last anyone a long time, and they were all numbers I hadn’t heard of before. *Weeping Willow* wasn’t there; not even the famous *Maple Leaf*, though I found three evident attempts at a follow-up in *Fig Leaf Rag*, *Palm Leaf Rag*, and *Rose Leaf Rag*. These Joplin

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Affeldt, *Jazz Report*, January 1961. Reprinted in *The Rag Times*, January 1982, 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Max Morath, *Max Morath’s Ragtime Guide: A Collection of Ragtime Songs and Piano Solos* (New York: Hollis Music, 1972), 103.

<sup>10</sup> “People We Hear About,” *The Ragtimer*, December 1962, 5.

ragtime were a wonderful assortment, and one must suppose a cross-section of the very best ragtime.

The trouble with the Museum though is that you can't take the rags away to try them over; and still less can you take a piano into the Reading Room. Making copies of copyright music is illegal, in addition to being very hard work, so almost all one can do is admire the originals and make furtive notes.<sup>11</sup>

As Wilford notes, in the 1940s, when ragtime originals *could* be found, making copies was often "very hard work." Even into the 1960s, before photocopiers became ubiquitous, Peter Lundberg and other revivalists have recalled making copies from available sources by hand.<sup>12</sup> Richard Zimmerman has written about having "prints made from rolls of film containing badly-shot pages of sheet music."<sup>13</sup>

"We often wonder," begins a column in the February 1963 issue of the Ragtime Society's newsletter, "how much Classic Ragtime sheet music is lying on publishers' shelves gathering dust; not listed in catalogues; not known by collectors to be available, and generally speaking, lost, to all intents and purposes."<sup>14</sup> Troves of unsold store or publishers' stock occasionally turned up as late as the 1960s, sold by mail to members of the Ragtime Society or readers of the *RagTime Review* on a "first come, first served" basis; and dedicated sheet music collectors could still find sheets in second-hand thrift shops or a neighbor's piano bench; but so rare were some works and so poor the institutionalized collection of ragtime music that some published compositions—even by the "king" of

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Wilford, "Ragtime - An Excavation," *Piano Jazz* 2 (1945): 10.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Lundberg, interview with the author, 5 June 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Dick Zimmerman, "Tributes from Fellow Ragtimers," *The Rag Times*, November 2002, 2.

<sup>14</sup> "Sheet Music," *The Ragtimer*, February 1963, 6.

ragtime writers, Scott Joplin—were not known to survive in even a single copy.<sup>15</sup>

Bourgeoning interest in ragtime in the 1950s and early 1960s created a modest demand for sheet music reprints, but until the success of *The Sting*, many mainstream publishers and music rightsholders seem to have been wary of investing the time or money to cater to such a niche market.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the task of organizing and financing such reprint folios fell largely to specialty presses and, in many cases, the revivalists themselves. Financial constraints and the difficulties of licensing copyrighted music—some publishers were known to be stubbornly uncooperative—often limited them to material in the public domain.

Based largely on the 1709 British law known as the Statute of Anne (8 Anne, 9 c., 1709), the United States' first copyright law, the Federal Copyright Act of 1790, was designed to preempt and standardize existing copyright laws that could vary from state to state.<sup>17</sup> Article 1, Section 8, Clause 8 of the Constitution had endowed Congress with the power to “promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive right to their respective Writings and Discoveries.” Like the Statute of Anne, the Federal Copyright Act of 1790 provided for “Maps, Charts and Books” to be protected for fourteen years with the possibility of an additional

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<sup>15</sup> In a 28 June 2014 post to the Facebook “Ragtimers Club” group, longtime ragtime enthusiast Robert Allen recalled that in the early 1960s, no original printed copy of Scott Joplin’s “Leola” was known to ragtime collectors; in its stead, photocopies of a handwritten score, allegedly originating in the UK, circulated among ragtime enthusiasts. Several copies of the published version have since surfaced, but they remain exceedingly rare, as noted by Bill Edwards (<http://www.perfessorbill.com/pbmidi15.shtml>).

<sup>16</sup> The Vogel Music Company seems to have been something of an exception, keeping a number of ragtime piano solos in print in the 1950s and early ‘60s (often with simple text-only covers), including Adeline Shepherd’s “Pickles and Peppers,” Charles Hunter’s “Tickled to Death,” Joe Jordan’s “That Teasin’ Rag,” Charles L. Johnson’s “Porcupine Rag,” Percy Wenrich’s “Persian Lamb Rag,” and Raymond Birch’s [Charles L. Johnson’s] “Powder Rag,” among others.

<sup>17</sup> William Lichtenwanger, “94-553 and All That: Ruminations on Copyright Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow,” *Notes Second Series* 35 (1979): 806.



fourteen-year extension if the author was still alive.<sup>18</sup> A minor revision in 1831 had increased the initial copyright term to twenty-eight years (retaining the same possible fourteen-year extension) and notably added musical scores to the list of copyrightable works.<sup>19</sup> The Copyright Act of 1909 retained the initial twenty-eight year term of the 1831 Act, but among other changes, it extended the renewal period from fourteen to twenty-eight years, effectively doubling the maximum term afforded by the original 1790 Act to fifty-six years after initial publication.<sup>20</sup> The copyright law then remained basically unchanged until an amendment was added on 19 September 1962, by which time all works published in the United States on or before 18 September 1906 had entered public domain. The amendment (and eight that followed in the subsequent decade) incrementally extended the term of copyright to seventy-five years, so that works published on or after 19 September 1906, if renewed after their initial twenty-eight-year term, did not enter the public domain until 1982.<sup>21</sup>

For the early ragtime revivalists, then, U.S. copyright law in 1962 guaranteed that works published prior to September 1906 were in the public domain, and thus freely available for reprinting and circulating with no royalties due to either the composer (if

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<sup>18</sup> "Laws of the United States," *Columbian Centinel*, 17 July 1790, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin W. Rudd, "Notable Dates in American Copyright, 1783-1969," U.S. Copyright Office, accessed 16 December 2013, <http://www.copyright.gov/history/dates.pdf>. Although the 1831 revision of the law was the first to explicitly provide for musical compositions, Lichtenwanger notes that prior to 1831, a number of musical works had been successfully copyrighted as "books" or "pamphlets." See Lichtenwanger, 808.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* Unpublished works were subject to a nebulous "common law" and treated differently than published works. A discussion of the laws governing unpublished works is outside the scope of this study.

<sup>21</sup> "Duration of Copyright," U.S. Copyright Office, accessed 17 December 2013, <http://www.copyright.gov/circs/circ15a.pdf>.

living), the composer's estate, or the original publisher.<sup>22</sup> Because timely renewal by the rightsholder was required to maintain copyright protection beyond the initial twenty-eight-year term, in 1962, even works published after 1906—and as recently as 1934—*might* still be public domain. This twenty-eight-year “gray period” coinciding with the latter half of the ragtime era meant that determining the copyright status of a ragtime work for re-printing or recording could be a daunting and treacherous task. Penalties for even unintentional copyright infringers could be severe, discouraging many would-be publishers from re-printing old rags. With a small but growing base of ragtime enthusiasts looking to obtain ragtime sheet music (but few established publishers willing or able to oblige), many of the earliest ragtime clubs, societies, and newsletters came into existence largely to facilitate the re-printing and distribution of ragtime works among their members and subscribers.

Making available hard-to-find records, books, and sheet music was one of the primary goals—at least initially—of the Ragtime Society. Immediately upon its inception in the winter of 1962, the Society embarked upon a series of ragtime sheet music reprints, with an announcement in the first issue of its newsletter (February 1962) that “[w]e hope to produce one piece of Classic Ragtime sheet music (now in the public domain) every month.” Advertised in its own newsletter as well as in the pages of the *RagTime Review*, the offerings for the first year comprised seven works originally published in or prior to 1906, and only one with a later original publication date: Joseph Lamb's “Sensation”

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<sup>22</sup> I choose to focus on the year 1962 in this section because it marks not only the year in which the *RagTime Review* and the Ragtime Society (of Canada) were founded, but also because it marks a turning point in U.S. copyright law.

(1908).<sup>23</sup> While “Sensation” had fallen out of copyright for non-renewal at the end of its initial twenty-eight-year term, one of the 1906 pieces selected for re-printing, “Frog Legs” by James Scott, was still protected.<sup>24</sup> Whether the Ragtime Society reprinted copyrighted works without needed authorization (knowingly or unknowingly) is unclear; however the appearance of works still protected by copyright among the Society’s reprints coupled with news of the September 1962 copyright law change apparently prompted several letters to the Society’s directors. In response to the issue of copyright, a front-page announcement in the February 1963 newsletter informed readers that “[u]ntil further notice we will not reprint any sheet music that was published after 1906.”

Although copyright law dictated which ragtime works could be freely re-printed and circulated and which could not, the revivalists’ musical tastes knew no such legislative bounds. A year into the Ragtime Society’s sheet music reprint initiative, while compiling member-submitted requests for specific titles to be reprinted, the Society’s secretary, Jim Kinnear, noted that “[i]t would appear...that most of you are not aware of copyright requirements.”<sup>25</sup> Attempting to determine which rags younger than 56 years had lapsed into public domain due to non-renewal at the end of their initial 28-year term would be too costly and time consuming for the Society’s limited resources; thus, commonly-requested rags such as Artie Matthews’s “Pastime” Rags (copyrighted 1913-1920) could not be reprinted. In the Society’s March 1963 newsletter, Society chairman

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<sup>23</sup> The Ragtime Society’s sheet music reprints in 1962 were: “Original Rags” (Scott Joplin, 1899), “Elite Syncopations,” (Scott Joplin, 1902), “Sunflower Slow Drag” (Scott Joplin and Scott Hayden, 1901), “St. Louis Rag” (Tom Turpin, 1903), “Frog Legs Rag” (James Scott, 1906), “Harlem Rag” (Tom Turpin, 1897), “Mississippi Rag” (William H. Krell, 1897), and “Sensation” (Joseph Lamb, 1908).

<sup>24</sup> Max Morath, interview with the author, 9 July 2014.

<sup>25</sup> “From the Secretary’s Desk,” *The Ragtimer*, January 1963, 3.

John Fisher noted that despite survey responses from a hundred members indicating a strong interest in the reprints, sales had slowed considerably, and costs were not being met. He mused that perhaps the Society had “goofed” in its choices of rags to reprint, but if indeed the selection of rags was to blame, he urged readers to “[b]ear in mind the copyright restrictions.” Fisher’s comment hints that demand may have been strongest for post-1906 compositions, which would have included all of Joseph Lamb’s rags, most of James Scott’s works, and a significant number of Joplin’s rags. Thanks largely to *They All Played Ragtime*, by 1963, Joplin, Lamb, and Scott were already widely lauded among the ragtime coterie as the music’s “Big Three,” and, according to Max Morath, their music was in highest demand, even if relatively little of it had been reprinted for fear of legal repercussions. In an ironic twist, neither Lamb, Scott, nor their families had been very diligent about seeking copyright renewals, and by 1963 most of their published works from the period 1906-1922 had been in the public domain for a dozen years or more.<sup>26</sup>

Like the Ragtime Society, the *RagTime Review* offered its readers reprints of ragtime sheet music, but while the former produced professionally plate-printed reproductions, the *Review* relied on Kodak’s Verifax process, an early photocopy machine that enabled one-at-a-time copies to be made (albeit in lesser quality than the plate-printing process afforded). Both organizations charged buyers \$1.00 per reprint, but whereas the Ragtime Society’s plate-printed reproductions required minimum sales of 30 or 40 copies to cover set-up costs, the *Review*’s Verifax copies could be made to order with no minimum required. Despite initial concerns for the copyright status of the works to be reprinted, the

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<sup>26</sup> Max Morath, interview with the author, 9 July 2014.

*RagTime Review* seems to have quickly become more cavalier in its observance of copyright laws, perhaps as a result of the flexibility to add or delete titles from its reprint offerings with little financial risk. In its inaugural issue (January 1962), the *Review* offered reprints of two rags: Scott Joplin's "The Easy Winners" and J. Bodewalt Lampe's "Creole Belles," with the note "These numbers are in PD."<sup>27</sup> The *Review's* reprint offerings expanded quickly, however, and a survey of the fourteen titles for sale in the *Review's* October 1962 edition includes Scott Joplin's "Searchlight Rag" (1907), then still very much under copyright control.

While Tichenor and Cassidy of the *RagTime Review* seem not to have encountered any trouble with their reprint of Joplin's "Searchlight Rag" (presumably because of their low profile in the larger music scene), the rag's inclusion the following year in Max Morath's landmark folio *100 Ragtime Classics* provides an example of the hazards faced by even the most careful, observant revivalists who sought to reprint rare rags. In preparing the 1963 collection, Morath had secured the permission of several publishers to include copyrighted works they controlled—or thought they controlled—including eleven from E. B. Marks. Among the Marks rags Morath licensed was "Searchlight," but unbeknownst to both Morath and Marks, through an irregularity in the rag's copyright renewal in 1935, Marks's ownership was invalid. Morath explains:

In 1964, I was working in New York at the Village Vanguard with my quartet, the Original Rag Quartet. One night, I'm standing there spiling between numbers and I see a guy coming up through the audience and I think: uh-oh, trouble. He hands me the blue thing. I was processed-served. I was sued. Jerry Vogel. [Laughs] You can imagine! I'm working at the Village Vanguard with a nice crowd of people and I get sued. [...] It turns out that

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<sup>27</sup> "Try These on Your Piano," *The RagTime Review*, January 1962, 5.

there were two renewals of “Searchlight” by Mrs. Joplin... What Mrs. Joplin did either inadvertently or on purpose... she renewed “Searchlight” twice. Vogel had the prior renewal, and he was legally right. [...] I went to [Herbert Marks] in shock: I’m being sued! I’ve got the blue paper, and I’m being sued! [...] Marks calls his attorney, and the guy comes right over and they say “We know Jerry,” (and Jerry is a son-of-a-bitch, you know) “and we’ll deal with it... we’ll take him to lunch.” And these nice people settled the lawsuit by paying Jerry Vogel \$250 as a settlement. And this is 1963—you’re looking at a couple of thousand dollars [now]. I have a beautiful court settlement document showing the payment.<sup>28</sup>

By the time of the settlement with Vogel, the initial 300 copies of the spiral-bound *100 Ragtime Classics* were nearly depleted. A second edition of 150 copies was prepared, nearly identical to the first except that “Searchlight” was removed, and in its place Morath substituted the obscure “Trixy” by Libbie Erickson. By Morath’s own admission, “Trixy” was hardly a “classic,” but he chose it for inclusion because it was unquestionably in the public domain (published 1904), a copy was readily available for reproduction, and the rag’s title would not upset pagination in the alphabetically-organized table of contents.<sup>29</sup>

*100 Ragtime Classics* was the first substantial compendium of ragtime sheet music that brought together the music of ragtime’s “Big Three” along with lesser-known composers, drawn from the catalogues of various music publishers and offered for sale to the general public. While Morath is quick to downplay its importance (“[W]hatever influence...it had, there were only 450 copies of it ever out there...not many”<sup>30</sup>), it nevertheless provided the cornerstone for many revivalists’ libraries, and its very existence owed much to the close cooperation among a coterie of collectors with whom Morath

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<sup>28</sup> Max Morath, interview with the author, 9 July 2014.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Max Morath. Personal interview, 9 July 2014.

was in touch.<sup>31</sup> He had met Trebor Tichenor and Russ Cassidy in 1961, and also Richard Zimmerman (future co-founder of the Maple Leaf Club and editor of its organ, *The Rag Times*), and those whom Morath describes as the “big cookers” behind the budding Ragtime Society in Toronto: John Fisher and Idamay and Allen MacInnes. “We all sat and talked about—somebody ought to do this. Somebody ought to create a re-print. And that’s when...I was talking to my cousin who knew nothing about the rags but who was an expert in the microfilm business, [and] he said ‘Well, let me do it.’”<sup>32</sup> In selecting the one hundred rags to be included, Morath recalls:

You would go immediately to the John Stark catalogue. You would go immediately to the E. B. Marks catalogue. You would go to Remick. And that’s what you’d use. And you would say ‘I have to have all the Joplins. I have to have all of the Joe Lambs. I’d like to have all the James Scotts. I want Eubie Blake.’ That’s what you’d do. In other words, the list...was all of the rags that we all wanted that were available or could be re-printed in such a volume in 1963...[O]f the stuff that was in copyright, it was the copyright searches that I did [at the Library of Congress] that revealed the accessibility and the availability of the Joplins we could use. Of course, we put all the Joplins that were pre-1906, you see. Obviously...that’s the reason for the contents.<sup>33</sup>

Morath’s introduction to the collection is concise and frank in discussing the collection’s contents. Following acknowledgments to those who helped in the selection process and the cooperation of several rights holders, he writes: “[t]his collection includes all the best of classic ragtime available for reprint in an omnibus volume such as this, as we publish in mid-1963. Of the prime rags not included you may be sure every effort was made to obtain reprint rights to them.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Copies of *100 Ragtime Classics* were still being offered for sale in *The Rag Times* as late as May, 1969.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Max Morath, introduction to *100 Ragtime Classics* (Denver: DONN, 1963): III.

On occasions when active copyright protection hindered revivalists' ability to reprint desired rags themselves, both *The RagTime Review* and *The Ragtimer* sought to harness the collective power of their combined subscriber base, exhorting readers to join in mass letter-writing campaigns encouraging rightsholders to reissue certain titles. In early 1964, two of Scott Joplin's most celebrated rags, "Fig Leaf Rag" and "Rose Leaf Rag" were still under copyright control of Jerry Vogel Music Co. When John Fisher and a few others of the Ragtime Society were unsuccessful in convincing Vogel to reissue the two, Fisher took to the pages of *The Ragtimer*:

We have mentioned from time to time that these 2 numbers by Joplin are owned by Jerry Vogel Music Co. Many of us have written to Vogel asking him to re-issue them... The Ragtime Society recently offered to purchase 100 of each number. Perhaps if the Ragtime Review makes a similar request to their readers, and you all individually write to Vogel, the collective result might be early printing of these 2 numbers.<sup>35</sup>

Fisher's plea elicited a swift response—not from Vogel, but from Cassidy and Tichenor at *The RagTime Review*:

The RAGTIME SOCIETY recently asked its readers and the REVIEW to write to Vogel Music Co. to see if they would get off their duffs and re-print or let someone else re-print ROSE LEAF AND FIG LEAF RAGS. Since these are two of the very best rags, it is a commendable idea indeed and the REVIEW heartily endorses it. However, what bugs us is that we recommended the same course of action in the April '63 R/R [*RagTime Review*], page 9, first!... A whole year ago!... John, you're paying for the R/R, you may as well read it too. Joking aside, both our groups would have offered these rags early except for the copyright ownership by Vogel. Some have already written him and he is "thinking about it." If you are to get these two top-notch rags, he will need more prodding... It is important that he get quantitys [sic] of correspondence; quality is not needed.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> "Sheet Music," *The Ragtimer*, February 1964, 3.

<sup>36</sup> *The Ragtime Review*, April 1964, 9.



Perhaps the most high-profile instance of copyright law hampering efforts to compile and reprint ragtime sheet music came in 1971 with the publication of the New York Public Library's two-volume folio *The Collected Works of Scott Joplin*. Originally intended to represent Joplin's entire published output, the title had to be changed from "Complete" to "Collected," as editor Vera Brodsky Lawrence wrote in a preface that "[c]ertain omissions are regretfully noted."<sup>37</sup> Several works, including Joplin's fabled opera *A Guest of Honor*, were absent for the practical reason that no copy could be found. But others, including "Fig Leaf Rag," "Rose Leaf Rag," and the now-infamous "Searchlight Rag" were missing because the copyright holder—identified curtly and personally by Lawrence as "Mr Jerry Vogel"—refused his permission.

Copyright limitations have not always been so readily acknowledged. At times, publishers of sheet music reprint collections have sought justification for their selections (and omissions) on stylistic grounds, subtly and tacitly establishing or re-writing boundaries or subgenre labels to suit the available public domain material. Two widely-circulated ragtime folios selected and annotated by David Jasen and published by Dover Publications, Inc. serve to illustrate this point. *Ragtime Gems*, published in 1986, features twenty-five rags published between 1904 and 1910 and begins with Jasen's assertion that "The Golden Age of ragtime, when middle-class America not only accepted ragtime but reveled in it, lasted from 1904 to 1910." In the paragraphs that follow, Jasen writes that these were the years when "ragtime was heard all over the land," and "the sales of ragtime sheet music boomed." Jasen's claims of ragtime's popularity at that time are sufficiently

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<sup>37</sup> Vera Brodsky Lawrence, introduction to *Scott Joplin: Collected Piano Works* (New York: The New York Public Library, 1971): xi.

vague to avoid contention, but his cutoff date of 1910 seems a rather curious choice until one considers that—following the 75-year rule established by the copyright extensions of the 1960s and codified in the Copyright Act of 1976 (Public Law 94-553)—1910 marks the last year in which all published rags would unequivocally have been in the public domain at the time *Ragtime Gems* was published. Similarly, Dover's next notable ragtime folio (excepting its 1988 *Complete Piano Rags* of Scott Joplin), *Ragtime Jubilee: 42 Piano Gems 1911-21*, published in 1997, finds Jasen's introduction opining that "[t]he decade 1911-1921 was the booming adolescence of ragtime...and this ear-catching, toe-tapping piano style was gradually coming into its full flowering." While Jasen avoids recycling the term "Golden Age" from his earlier introduction, the implications strongly suggest that *this*, in fact, may have been ragtime at its peak—the later 1921 cutoff date once again coinciding neatly with the 75-year copyright term still in force in 1997.

As of 2015, the ramifications of changing copyright law continue to influence which materials are easily obtainable for ragtimers and which are not. Among other things, the 1998 passage of the Copyright Term Extension Act (CTEA, Public Law 105-298) increased the term of copyrights for works published prior to 1 January 1978 an additional twenty years, ensuring that works still in copyright on that date from as far back as 1923 would not begin to enter the public domain until the first day of 2019 at the earliest. Although all works originally published during ragtime's peak years (1897-1917) are now public domain in the United States and able to be distributed widely in print and freely online, much of the stride, novelty, pop song, and early jazz which factors into the repertoire of many revivalists continues to be absent from online collections and print

volumes. Although digital technologies make it easy and inexpensive for clandestine copies of copyrighted music, recordings, and videos to be made and circulated, their distribution—out of the public and rights holders' eyes—still relies on a cooperative network of trusting individuals.

I do not wish to overstate the significance of copyright in the early years of the ragtime revival, yet its implications should not be overlooked either. Coupled with relatively crude (by 2015 standards), unreliable, and costly document copying methods available to the general public in the early 1960s, the copyright extensions of 1962 and the general difficulty of determining the copyright status of post-1906 works kept many rags out of print and largely out of reach to all but the most dedicated collectors in the early years of the ragtime revival. And yet, ragtime enthusiasts have always been a resourceful bunch, lending credence to the axiom "Where there's a will, there's a way." I am not suggesting that works still under copyright were "off limits" or otherwise unobtainable. While copyright protection could (and did) prevent a number of rags from being reprinted and circulated *en masse*, for many ragtime enthusiasts and aspiring pianists, the difficulties sometimes encountered in obtaining out-of-print or hard-to-find sheet music were merely obstacles, not roadblocks, in their pursuit. Overcoming such obstacles often meant working together cooperatively; in many cases, close, personal friendships were born of the need for ragtime collectors, performers, and historians (with many, of course, being all three) to work together to find and share their discoveries. Such friendships provided the basis on which organizations (like the Ragtime Society and the Maple Leaf Club) and publications (like the *RagTime Review*, the *Ragtimer*, and the *Rag*

*Times*) were founded. If their initial *raison d'être* was largely to facilitate distribution of hard-to-find source material (sheet music and recordings), they were also instrumental in building networks of like-minded individuals for sharing stories, observations, analyses, performance techniques, and more. In the following sections, I will discuss the role of these organizations and publications.

### 3.2 HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: *CHRISTENSEN'S RAGTIME REVIEW (1914-1918)*

Efforts to collectivize geographically disparate ragtime enthusiasts by means of a national organization and its "house organ" can be traced to the ragtime era itself. *Christensen's Ragtime Review*, published from 1914 to 1918 by Axel Christensen, a pianist, composer, teacher, and owner of a successful franchise of popular music schools, it was the first significant publication dedicated to the music. Along with publisher John Stark, Christensen (1881-1955) had been one of the early twentieth century's foremost exponents of "classic" ragtime. He developed his interest in ragtime as a youth, and in Chicago in 1903 he opened the first Christensen School of Popular Music with himself as the sole teacher.<sup>38</sup> Although his pedagogical efforts drew the ire of more "respectable" classically-oriented piano teachers,<sup>39</sup> his school proved both popular and lucrative, and he soon began opening branches elsewhere; by 1913 he presided over at least fifty branches

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<sup>38</sup> David A. Jasen and Gene Jones, *That American Rag* (New York: Schirmer, 2000), 124.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.



Figure 3.1 *Christensen's Ragtime Review*

from New York to Honolulu.<sup>40</sup> His schools, coupled with his own very successful series of ragtime instruction books (required texts for his students, one imagines) led Christensen to fashion himself the “Czar of Ragtime.” In his *Ragtime Review*, which served chiefly to promote his schools, method books, and correspondence courses, Christensen sought to legitimize and gentrify ragtime; the magazine was a not-so-subtle rebuttal of the aspersions that, for more than a decade, had been cast against him by more “traditional” piano teachers who were fierce proponents of European classics and—sometimes—their lesser American counterparts. Amidst sound practice advice, technical exercises, discussions of music theory and terminology, and complete music scores (including a number of rags reprinted from the Stark catalogue), the *Ragtime Review* carried Christensen’s proselytic messages on behalf of “real ragtime.” From ragtime’s wholesomeness to its usefulness in building pianistic technique, *Christensen’s Ragtime Review* invoked comparisons with “classical” music at every turn:

There was a time not beyond the recollection even of children today when ragtime was frowned upon as something quite unworthy a real music-loving people; and long-haired, sad-visaged composers and other maestros of the divine art issued long dissertations against its use. But that time has passed to the limbo, where the woodbine twineth not, and that prejudice has gone with hundreds of others that had their origin in blind opposition. Today ragtime is not only approved by the mass of the people, but also by many of the most distinguished ultra-musical folk, by great composers, by distinguished operatic stars, by directors of symphony orchestras, and quite generally throughout the rank and file of good musicians. It is pointed out by the learned advocacy of this more cheerful era of melody that ragtime is nothing but syncopation, and that syncopation in a more or less degree has been found in the compositions of the most profound masters of music through all time. Those who still frown or pretend to frown upon the

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<sup>40</sup> John Edward Hasse, “Axel W. Christensen,” *Grove Music Online*, accessed 10 September 2015, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/subscriber/article/grove/music/41373>.

popularity of melodies in which so-called ragtime is employed cease to be taken seriously.<sup>41</sup>

Real ragtime must be played with a firm, strong, legato touch and the time must be absolutely even and correct. These two features are also greatly desired in classical music, (or any kind of music for that matter)...[t]herefore, if in learning real ragtime, the pupil also learns to play with a correct touch and in proper time, is it reasonable to suppose that the study of ragtime would in any way spoil a pupil for playing classical music? On the contrary, in real ragtime, the pupil learns many things that are essential and helpful in playing classical music and not a single thing that could possibly be hurtful in any way.<sup>42</sup>

Christensen supplemented his messages with illustrations that reinforced the “classical” aesthetic he sought to convey. The cover of the very first *Christensen’s Ragtime Review* (Fig. 3.01) shows a photographic portrait of Christensen himself, neatly groomed and dressed in a tuxedo, above an illustration of a pianist in concert “tails” seated at an elegant grand piano, sheet music on the stand, and his hands artfully arranged just above the keyboard. Inside pages include a photo of a “well arranged Ragtime Studio” showing a handsomely (if plainly) furnished tidy office with a prim young woman (presumably the teacher) seated behind a desk and an upright piano against the wall, several pieces of sheet music carefully arranged on its stand. (Christensen’s frequent depiction of pianos with sheet music seems to be a subtle reminder to detractors and potential students alike that ragtime is a “literate” and therefore legitimate music.) Even when the *Review* appeared to succumb to the popular notion of ragtime as loud, fast, and perhaps virtuosic music (as it did in a series of advertisements for Christensen’s schools), it did so with

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<sup>41</sup> “The Age of Ragtime,” *Christensen’s Ragtime Review*, December 1914, 4.

<sup>42</sup> “The Popularity of Ragtime,” *Christensen’s Ragtime Review*, December 1914, 2.

images of a pianist in formal attire at a grand piano, arms raised, one foot steadying the piano stool, hair somewhat disheveled, and artist's lines to indicate vigorous motion.

The gravitas with which Christensen presented ragtime served not only his own purposes, but his advertisers' as well. The *Ragtime Review* carried advertisements for the more classically-oriented *The Etude* and *Musical Observer* magazines, but one of the *Review's* most prominent advertisers was publisher John Stark, who must have sensed a kindred spirit in Christensen and an opportune market among the *Review's* readers for his catalogue of "high-class instrumental rags." Under the heading "Rags That Never Die," one of Stark's advertisements in the February 1916 issue of *Christensen's Ragtime Review* advises readers that:

We are the storm center of high-class instrumental rags. The whole rag fabric of this country was built around our "Maple Leaf" "Sunflower" "Cascades" "Entertainer" "Frog Legs" Etc. We have advertised these as classic rags, and we mean just what we say. They are the perfection of type. "The glass of fashion and the mold of form." "Age cannot wither or custom stale their infinite variety." They have lifted ragtime from its low estate and lined it up with Beethoven and Bach.

*Christensen's Ragtime Review* would eventually be subsumed into Walter Jacob's *Melody* magazine,<sup>43</sup> but it left an indelible mark, establishing a form, terminology, and title that would be adopted by ragtime revivalists nearly a half-century later who sought to legitimize ragtime and unite its supporters in their own time.

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<sup>43</sup> "Greetings to Ragtime Review Subscribers," *Melody*, March 1918, cover.



### 3.3 THE RAGTIME REVIEW (1962-1966)

Despite mounting interest in ragtime among a subset of traditional jazz enthusiasts and collectors since the mid-1940s, by 1961, the loss of several prominent publications coupled with the almost total obfuscation of “classic” ragtime by the more commercially successful honky tonk movement threatened to upset the fragile network of “ragtimers” that had been forming. While *They All Played Ragtime* had succeeded somewhat in introducing (or re-introducing) the concept of “classic” piano ragtime, inspiring individual musicians, collectors, and enthusiasts scattered throughout the United States and abroad,<sup>44</sup> and even as it planted the seed for a revivalist ideology and discourse, the book itself offered no means for regular interaction among its readers. *The Record Changer*, which had inadvertently provided perhaps the liveliest forum for ragtime discussion among a geographically disparate readership, ceased publication in late 1957. Its editor, Richard B. Hadlock, attributed the *Changer’s* demise to “soaring” production costs, understaffing, and dwindling participation in its records “Wanted” and “For Disposition” lists which, he reminded readers, had always been “the heart of the *Record Changer*.”<sup>45</sup>

*The RagTime Review* (1962-1966), published by Russell Cassidy and Trebor Tichenor and named in honor of Axel Christensen’s *Ragtime Review*,<sup>46</sup> was the first

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<sup>44</sup> *The All Played Ragtime* was first published in England in 1958 by Sidgwick and Jackson; a second printing under the auspices of the “Jazz Book Club” was published in London in 1960.

<sup>45</sup> Richard B. Hadlock, Letter to subscribers, c. December 1957.

<sup>46</sup> Cassidy and Tichenor acknowledged their inspiration in the first issue of their own *RagTime Review*: “The more widely read readers will perceive the co-editors’ indebtedness - in choice of namesake - to Mr. Axel Christensen. His original RAGTIME REVIEW was first published in 1914 to push his system of ragtime schools. We thought the name still appropriate. The REVIEW cost \$1.00 in 1915 as it does today, tho’ some changes have been made.” See *The RagTime Review*, January 1962, 6.

periodical since the 1910s to be devoted exclusively to ragtime. It heralded the beginning of a new phase in the piano ragtime revival that saw the emergence of several notable ragtime clubs, societies, and publications, which in turn laid the groundwork for the earliest ragtime revival festivals and contests as well. For much of its four-and-a-half year existence, the quarterly *The RagTime Review* was a rather crudely typed and mimeographed affair, but it provided the first regular forum for interaction among geographically-dispersed ragtime revivalists and produced original articles that served as a cornerstone of much subsequent ragtime research. Other ragtime publications including *The Ragtimer* and *The Rag Times* re-printed articles from the *RagTime Review* well into the 1980s.

*The RagTime Review* developed from an idea first voiced by Paul Affeldt, a ragtime and traditional jazz enthusiast who published *Jazz Report*, one of several “no-frills” fan-operated magazines that catered to traditional jazz aficionados in the wake of the *Record Changer’s* demise. In the January 1961 edition of *Jazz Report*, Affeldt noted that several recent articles in his magazine that touched on ragtime had generated a fair amount of comment. “In nearly every letter the writer is amazed to find someone else who likes ragtime. Apparently the interest in this field is much wider and more untapped than anything I had ever dreamed of,” he wrote.<sup>47</sup> Affeldt had been an outspoken critic of “honky tonk” ragtime in the 1950s, and he remained somewhat fearful that young ragtime enthusiasts might be corrupted by the “riki-tick jokes with the bowler hats and big cigars”

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Affeldt, *Jazz Report*, 1961. Reprinted in *The Rag Times*, January 1982, 1-2.

or else lose interest in “classic” ragtime altogether if not properly nurtured.<sup>48</sup> Affeldt wrote that someone should “collectivise the scattered efforts of those trying to perpetuate and continue ragtime.”<sup>49</sup> He suggested the formation of an “International Society for the Preservation of Ragtime” and even proposed that two young ragtime enthusiasts in St. Louis that he knew—Russell E. Cassidy and Trebor Jay Tichenor—might be in the best position, both geographically and intellectually, to make it happen. In addition to operating a ragtime museum, Affeldt supposed such a society might endeavor to collect and preserve ragtime sheet music and make copies available to members as well as professional pianists and record companies in hopes of spurring them to record more “classic” ragtime.

Three months passed, and in April 1961, Cassidy and Tichenor responded with a two-page article in *Jazz Report* titled “Are We Ready for an International Ragtime Fraternity?” Cassidy was then a 35-year-old engineer at an aircraft plant, and Tichenor a 21-year old college student. Both were accomplished ragtime pianists as well as avid collectors of ragtime sheet music and piano rolls. “[W]e thought we were in a ragtime vacuum,” they later recalled, adding that they sought to reach “some of the others who [were] in the same predicament.”<sup>50</sup> Building upon Affeldt’s original comments, Cassidy and Tichenor suggested that the “rebirth” of interest in ragtime since the 1940s and especially following publication of *They All Played Ragtime* had resulted in people “scattered all over the world...who enjoy some facet of ragtime.”<sup>51</sup> Noting that “a means

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *The RagTime Review*, July 1962, 1.

<sup>51</sup> Cassidy and Tichenor, “Are We Ready,” 11.

of communication between individuals interested in this specific area of musical Americana would serve a useful purpose,” the two floated the idea of an “International Ragtime Fraternity, or Society.”<sup>52</sup> Their invocation of the term “Fraternity” (Affeldt had not used it) suggests that the two envisioned an organization that fostered meaningful and supportive inter-personal relationships in addition to serving the stated objective of promoting “classic” ragtime.

In the brief article, Cassidy and Tichenor proposed a non-profit, educational organization with four primary objectives: (1) to publish a directory of all members, thereby encouraging direct contact between individuals of like interests, (2) to facilitate the distribution of source materials, ranging from sheet music reprints to tapes and records of piano rolls, (3) to encourage discourse and research on ragtime-related topics, and (4) to publicize ragtime activities, including the performance schedules of prominent ragtime musicians. In a subtle endorsement of the conventional narrative which held that Missouri represented ragtime’s “homeland,” the two proposed that such an organization should be based in St. Louis—it was, they argued, “somewhat logical, as the center of jazz research is now in New Orleans at Tulane Univ.”<sup>53</sup> Still, Cassidy and Tichenor recognized that with such a geographically far-flung membership, “it would not be possible to organize along the lines of the familiar local jazz clubs whose dues go to concerts etc.”<sup>54</sup> In lieu of local meetings, concerts, or other events, the bulk of the society’s business and the achievement of its primary objectives would be conducted through a regularly-issued publication—a house organ—to be mailed to all members.

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

Response to Cassidy and Tichenor's *Jazz Report* article was favorable. They received a "flock of letters," from ragtime enthusiasts scattered throughout the country.<sup>55</sup> A Mrs. E. Weisman of Belmont, Massachusetts wrote that she had felt herself a "loner," since her friends preferred the Boston Symphony.<sup>56</sup> Encouraged by the show of support, in November 1961—a full three months before John Glenn's historic mission aboard *Friendship 7*—the pair returned to the pages of *Jazz Report* to announce "The International Ragtime Society on Launching Pad: Ready to Go into Orbit."<sup>57</sup> For a \$1.00 subscription-membership fee in the IRS (as they amusingly abbreviated it), Cassidy and Tichenor promised an as yet unnamed quarterly publication to include "significant news of the ragtime world, including noteworthy activities of members; articles on any and all aspects of ragtime; information on availability of sheet music, rolls, records, tape recordings etc., in short, anything of interest or service to the ragtime community." In making what is perhaps the earliest reference to the "ragtime community," Cassidy and Tichenor also reiterate their earlier desire to publish a directory "to facilitate correspondence and personal contacts between individual members."<sup>58</sup> Besides the proposed quarterly publication and some speculation that their IRS might eventually produce tapes or records of piano roll performances, Cassidy and Tichenor offered few details about what other projects such a society might undertake or how such a society would be run. Of utmost importance, it seems, would be the building and strengthening of interpersonal networks

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<sup>55</sup> *The RagTime Review*, July 1962, 1

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Russ Cassidy and Trebor Tichenor, "The International Ragtime Society on Launching Pad: Ready to Go into Orbit," *Jazz Report*, November 1961, 22.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

among ragtime enthusiasts—and especially among ragtime *collectors*: “Perhaps...Mrs. Weisman can find other loners in the area as it is hoped others will do.”<sup>59</sup>

The first issue of Cassidy and Tichenor’s publication appeared on schedule in January 1962, mailed to about a dozen subscribers.<sup>60</sup> It bore the title *The RagTime Review*, and its masthead proclaimed its purpose: “Published Quarterly in the Interest of Classic Ragtime — This is the first issue of the RAGTIME REVIEW which is intended to be a sounding board for information of interest to ragophiles, i.e., persons seriously interested in classic ragtime, in any of its aspects.” In slightly altered form, the masthead was repeated on all subsequent editions, amended to add “...in any of its aspects: performance, sheet music, records, history, piano rolls, & c.” By invoking the term *classic ragtime*, Cassidy and Tichenor sought not only to distinguish the music they championed from the “honky tonk” ragtime still popular on dime-store LPs and heard on TV by the likes of the *Lawrence Welk Show*’s Jo Ann Castle, but they sought the legitimacy and historical continuity the term afforded. (“Classic Ragtime” had been coined in the 1910s by pedagogue Axel Christensen and publisher John Stark to advocate—to their commercial advantage—ragtime they deemed to be of the highest artistic caliber.)

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<sup>59</sup> *The RagTime Review*, July 1962, 1

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

THE  
**RagTime Review**  
 VOL. IV No 2      APR. '65

PUBLISHED QUARTERLY IN THE INTEREST OF CLASSIC RAGTIME

The RAGTIME REVIEW is published as a sounding board for information of interest to Ragophiles, ie persons seriously interested in CLASSIC RAGTIME and its aspects; performance, sheet music, records, history, piano rolls &c.

Spring is our annual DIRECTORY issue, of directory service for your convenience find it useful. The CONTROVERSY on given further airing on p. 7, and Treb some ragtimers are playing can be found on p 9, while our Q & A dept. is on pp 6 and 10.



and we have a notice of a NEW type ience on page 5- we hope you will how ragtime should be played is analyses WEEPING WILLOW on p 2. Where

We're sure you will be interested in the new RECORDS this time which

appear on p 11- in fact we think you are in for a pleasant surprise, both jazz and ragwise. P 12 contains an item which we hope you will take notice of if you plan to be near St Louis in August: see GOLDENROD. The fabulous Ragtime "computer" as he has been called, Bob wright is given some account on p 13 in our PERSONALITIES feature, tho' we don't feel we can do him justice on a mere sheet of paper. He has to be heard to be believed!



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**Figure 3.2 The RagTime Review**  
 (Trebtor Tichenor is pictured at left; Russ Cassidy at right)

Absent from the initial *RagTime Review* was any reference to an “International Ragtime Society.” Cassidy and Tichenor seem to have abandoned their own plans to establish a ragtime society for two reasons. The first was that the two had neither the time nor the experience to operate such an organization. In the first *RagTime Review*’s six pages, laden with a host of typographical errors, the two men good-naturedly admitted their own obvious inexperience as typists and editors, suggesting, too, that they were unprepared for the task of simultaneously spearheading a new organization. As Russ Cassidy reflected four years later: “we were urged to start a non-profit Ragtime Organization, complete with museum, copying service and house organ...as a starter! We chose a more moderate (and practical) approach...the REVIEW. After all, there were other things in life which demand time and attention (such as jobs, lawn mowing etc.)”<sup>61</sup> The second reason was that between publication of their November 1961 *Jazz Report* article and issuance of the first *RagTime Review* in January 1962, Cassidy and Tichenor became aware of an independent effort by John Fisher and others in Toronto to form a Ragtime Society there that would render their own proposed society redundant. (I will discuss the Ragtime Society more in the next section.) Although they decided that the international collective of ragtime enthusiasts was large enough to support two independent publications, the prospect of two independently operating ragtime societies—despite the geographic distance between the two—may have been too much. Nevertheless, after registering their “happy surprise” to learn of Fisher’s plans for a Ragtime Society, Cassidy

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<sup>61</sup> Russ Cassidy. “As we go into our 5th year of publication...,” *The RagTime Review*, January 1966, 13.



and Tichenor pledged to “work together” while admitting that “a bit of mild competition will be good for both of us.”<sup>62</sup>

In the introduction to the first issue of their *RagTime Review*, Cassidy and Tichenor sought to establish the magazine’s objectives while also situating it within the (then) relatively brief history of the ragtime revival movement:

Since publication of the definitive history of ragtime, “THEY ALL PLAYED RAGTIME,” by Rudy [sic] Blesh and Harriet Janis, a great number of enthusiasts of this music have arisen. There has [sic] also been scattered examples of writing on the form by such writers as Roy Carew, Kay Thompson, Guy Waterman and Ann Charters, and some research has been done, notably by R. R. Darch.

A host of piano-roll and sheet music collectors has also grown up in recent years. We, the (CO)editors have long wished for a publication devoted solely to ragtime, and have been encouraged by many friends to try to fill this gap. This will not be an organ of propaganda to draw the indifferent or novelty-seekers into the fold, but it is to bring together those genuinely interested in the form; thus, the REVIEW will serve as a means of communication and will publish information on all phases of collecting and research. We hope to be able to also [provide], much-needed analytical work on ragtime composition.

The REVIEW will partly resemble a newsletter in an effort [to] report happenings of interest of individual subscribers as well as more well known personalities. This is intended as a means of uniting the widely scattered “fraternity” of ragophiles, and it is hoped that in [the] future some fraternity will actually exist.

Both Cassidy and Tichenor were accomplished amateur pianists who played ragtime, but they were also avid collectors of sheet music, piano rolls, and ragtime-related artifacts. Their statement of intent for the *RagTime Review* suggests that it was meant primarily for other collectors and those with an historical interest in the music—something that would seem to support Hill and Bithell’s observation that revival movements typically begin

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<sup>62</sup> *The RagTime Review*, January 1962, 4.

among “revivalist-collectors.”<sup>63</sup> No assumption is made that the readers are themselves musicians who might benefit from discussions of technique, performance style, practice tips, etc., nor is there any discussion of using the magazine as a forum for the encouragement of new ragtime composition. Elsewhere in the inaugural issue, Cassidy and Tichenor suggest that “[t]he bulk of interest is in collecting,” and they promise a magazine rich in articles devoted to collecting (specifically sheet music, piano rolls, and phonograph records and cylinders) as well as new record reviews and a classified section.<sup>64</sup>

Cassidy and Tichenor readily admitted to having had no prior editing or publishing experience between them,<sup>65</sup> and from the very first issue, they adopted a cordial, conversational tone in their writing that suggests that many of their early readers were already personal friends or acquaintances of the two editors.<sup>66</sup> Occasional parenthetical asides addressed to individuals—often by first name only—clearly reflect Cassidy and Tichenor’s desire to engender a sense of closeness and familiarity—of “fraternity” or “community”—among their readers. Much of the writing is in the first person, and articles in the *RagTime Review* offer an experience akin to eavesdropping on a familial conversation. The first two issues make tongue-in-cheek references to journalistic formality, with short articles that mimic conventional newspaper wire reports: “ST LOUIS (RNS) A recital was held at Pianoland studio, 11 Feb. featuring ragtime composer Jerry

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<sup>63</sup> Hill and Bithell, 25.

<sup>64</sup> *The RagTime Review*, January 1962, 2.

<sup>65</sup> See *The RagTime Review*, January 1966, 13.

<sup>66</sup> As part of the *RagTime Review*’s introductory article on the front page of its first issue, Cassidy and Tichenor wrote: “As most of our readers know, your editors have not edited many mags before (total to date, 0.0), and we are playing this issue by ear. (we need help in the typing dept. too Ed.)”

(TOM & JERRY RAG) Commack..." (Although never explicitly acknowledged, "RNS" presumably stood for "Ragtime News Service."<sup>67</sup>) The practice of beginning each article with the location, ostensibly for clarity, also served as a subtle reminder that the *Review* aspired to nationwide (and even international) coverage. Perhaps feeling that the joke had run its course, or perhaps realizing that a paucity of submitted ragtime "news" items from other parts of the country meant that their own hometown of St. Louis was at risk of appearing overrepresented, Cassidy and Tichenor abruptly ended their attempts to emulate too literally mainstream newspapers in their third issue.

The *Review's* physical appearance bore witness to its "homespun" origins. Mimeographed on standard letter-sized paper, hand-stapled, and hand-addressed, most issues consisted of eight to sixteen dense, crudely typed pages with only the rare line drawing for illustration. Typographical errors were common, and when noticed, corrections were made hastily by simply re-typing over the mistyped letter. "If you had deduced that the REVIEW was knocked out in the editor's basement partly ad lib, consider yourself a good detective!" quipped Cassidy in the January 1966 issue.<sup>68</sup> On several occasions, Cassidy apologized for the "abominable mimeograph method," but noted that budgetary constraints required it.<sup>69</sup> If anything, the magazine's rough-hewn appearance gave it a certain air of "honesty" among its readers. Obviously *not* the product of an opportunistic outsider or tightly-controlling organization, it was a publication produced *by* ragtime enthusiasts *for* ragtime enthusiasts. The unpretentious appearance of the *Review*

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<sup>67</sup> One untitled entry on page 6 of the inaugural *RagTime Review* of January 1962 begins: "St Louis (RNS..WE subscribe to no other N.S,)" [sic].

<sup>68</sup> *The RagTime Review*, January 1966, 13.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

(especially when coupled with its conversational format) projected an egalitarian ethos—one that invited its readers to look upon the two editors (and contributing authors) as fellow journeymen on the ragtime “pathway.” Even if not by design, the plain typewriter font used throughout each issue ensured that all letters, articles, advertisements, reviews, and editorials received relatively equal visibility.

The *Review* regularly solicited the input and contributions of its readers. “[I]n case you weren’t informed,” reads the first paragraph of the second issue, “your subscription also makes you a reporter on the staff.”<sup>70</sup> Most reader-submitted material amounted to notices of performers’ schedules, reports of meetings between ragtime enthusiasts, short opinion pieces, and a few record reviews. Most of the feature articles and record reviews continued to be written by either Cassidy or Tichenor throughout the *Review*’s five years. The *Review* also regularly printed letters sent in by readers. The “letters” section served as a sort of community “bulletin board” or discussion roundtable in which readers commented on past articles and reviews, shared their own ragtime-related experiences, responded to ragtime performances (both “in person” and on record and radio or television broadcasts), discussed ragtime performance styles, and sought collecting help and advice. Generally, letter writers struck a genial tone, though occasionally tempers flared—especially when discussions of “authentic” ragtime performance came up.

One particularly outspoken contributor on the subject of “authentic ragtime” to both *The RagTime Review* and the Ragtime Society’s publication *The Ragtimer* was Percy Franks, and his participation demonstrates one of the ways in which both publications

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<sup>70</sup> *The RagTime Review*, April 1962, 1.

sought to connect scattered ragtime revivalists with voices that purported to represent the “parent tradition.” Franks, who billed himself as “The Last of the Ragtime Kids” was born in New York City in 1892.<sup>71</sup> He studied classical piano as a child, and upon moving to Chicago in 1911 he heard and became interested in ragtime. Drawing upon his classical training, he taught himself to play ragtime and thereafter took jobs accompanying silent films, playing piano and calliope in amusement parks, burlesque houses, and in vaudeville.<sup>72</sup> He quit show business in 1918, returning in 1957 amid the mounting revival interest in ragtime.<sup>73</sup> In his many letters published in both *The RagTime Review* and *The Ragtimer*, he makes known his disdain for the “classic ragtime” movement and the efforts of some young revivalists to cultivate a more “genteel” approach. In the midst of a discussion of ragtime performance style, Franks contributed the following letter to *The RagTime Review*:

What irks me is to see pro pianists calling themselves Ragtime Pianists (most of them are from the younger crop)—and they try to cram their style of “Ragtime” down the throats of their listeners and tell them “That’s Ragtime.” Some of them call it “Classic,” “Modern” or “New” ragtime etc.

Ragtime is Ragtime. Never mind all these adjectives—if they want to invent something else, why dont [sic] they give it another name, for heaven’s sake—don’t call it Ragtime!...

We know that the classics should be played as written—note for note—no improvising; but ragtime properly done, is played from the heart—from the soul—with a beat...

So—if you want to play what the present generation is calling “Classic Ragtime” or “Modern Ragtime”—then play it just as it’s written. Don’t use any imagination, don’t improvise—don’t use any originality—then you can

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<sup>71</sup> Percy Franks, “Chinatown / Camptown Races,” Mel-O-Tone M-711 (45 rpm record picture sleeve), c. 1961.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* See also “Performers,” *The Ragtimer*, May 1963, 2.

<sup>73</sup> “Performers,” *The Ragtimer*, May 1963, 2.

call it what you wish, but don't call it RAGTIME. Perhaps you could call it "Boring and Monotonous Piano."<sup>74</sup>

Though Franks himself professed to speak with authority, his comments were far from universally accepted among the *Review's* readers. "I must say...[r]egardless of what Percy Franks or Russ Cole say...they have a right to their opinions. I think it would be interesting to get someone with authority to submit...the other side of the story" wrote Otto Dicks of California.<sup>75</sup> For performers *they* deemed authorities, Cassidy and Tichenor turned to two well-known pianists of the 1940s ragtime revival: Wally Rose and Johnny Wittwer. Both Rose and Wittwer expressed a general preference for ragtime played close to the published score, even if they allowed for considerable leeway in the hands of a skilled jazz pianist. "I have some affection for classic ragtime," wrote Wittwer, "to me that means playing it exactly as written, and not fast—in fact pretty slow... I think ragtime, though interesting, is a museum piece, like Corelli brass and Palestrina mass, diverting, but not relevant...I like the ragtime guys—Lamb, Joplin, etc. but I think they're best when performed by a great musician."<sup>76</sup>

The very first issue of the *RagTime Review* contained no paid advertisements, but a small, inconspicuous box on the final page announced the rates for those wishing to place advertisements in future issues (\$4.00 for a half-page, \$2.00 for a quarter-page). Thereafter, on the rare occasion when an advertisement did appear, it was usually for a mail-order dealer in old sheet music or piano rolls or to announce the release of a new record of ragtime interest.

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<sup>74</sup> Percy Franks, *The RagTime Review*, January 1965, 8.

<sup>75</sup> "Controversy Dept.," *The RagTime Review*, April 1965, 7.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

In the third issue of *The RagTime Review* (July 1962), Cassidy and Tichenor published a directory of all 122 *Review* subscribers and “friends” (notable ragtime personalities who were offered complimentary subscriptions). The directory included each subscriber’s full name, address, telephone number, stated collecting interests (e.g., records, sheet music, piano rolls), and, in some cases, a brief description (e.g. “Composer, Pianist” or “Has [piano] roll cutter”).<sup>77</sup> The directory included notable ragtime composers like Eubie Blake, Arthur Marshall, Julia Lee Niebergall, J. Russel Robinson, and Charles Thompson alongside record producers such as Paul Affeldt, Sam Charters, and John Steiner, historians such as Rudi Blesh, Roy Carew, Len Kunstadt, and Guy Waterman, notable revival-era pianists such as Bob Darch, Armand Hug, Johnny Maddox, Max Morath, Wally Rose, Ray Skjelbred, and John Wittwer, and dozens of enthusiasts. Cassidy and Tichenor expressed their hope that readers would use the directory to get to know each other personally. “Perhaps there is a ragophile nearby whom you didn’t know about... give him a ring and get acquainted,” they suggest. “Others may wish to take their directory along on a vacation this summer and perhaps visit along the way. We hope this will result in many new friendships.”<sup>78</sup> The next issue of the *Review* added forty-one more names to the directory, and subsequent issues continued to provide updates to the directory, adding the names of new subscribers and deleting those who died or asked to be removed. The directory reveals that by the *Review*’s fourth issue (October 1962), it claimed subscribers or friends in twenty-six states and six foreign countries (Canada, England, Finland, France, Sweden, and Switzerland). By April 1964, the directory had

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<sup>77</sup> Piano roll “cutters” (sometimes called “perforators”) are mechanical devices that enable the operator to punch the holes needed to create a “master” piano roll from a given sheet music score.

<sup>78</sup> “July ’62 Directory,” *The RagTime Review*, July 1962, 6.

swelled to 217 domestic and 30 foreign subscribers.<sup>79</sup> Reader-submitted reports attest to the directory's success in bringing ragtime enthusiasts together:

DAVE POPE visited with Alan Meyer since his hoped-for Xmas get-together didn't come off pan out [sic] due to others' obligations. They played records and read Joe Lamb's correspondence with Alan. Anyone in the Frisco Bay area interested in a further get-together should contact Dave at 308 Los Cerritos Dr., Vallejo, Cal.<sup>80</sup>

HAROLD DOERR has visited with RAY ROSE who is taking a brief rest from playing, but will go to Colo. Springs and Wash. DC soon. Harold continues: "Gary Ellison is packing them in at the Red Garter here in Springfield (Mo) with a mixed show of rags and sing-along; A big pitcher of Bud draft beer for \$1.25 and peanuts to eat or throw at the girls while tromping around on a sawdust floor." (Does Thelma know how you've been carrying on, Harold?)<sup>81</sup>

Tex Wyndham and I have gotten together on several occasions to talk and play ragtime. He is another of the self-taught musicians, but he has a nice style and the rags come through in good shape... John Hill, Broomall, Penna.<sup>82</sup>

Many issues of the *RagTime Review* concluded with a brief summary of the issue's contents, almost always including a reminder to use the directory to "meet another ragophile."

In the spring of 1965, Cassidy and Tichenor became more proactive in their efforts to unite ragtime enthusiasts "in person."<sup>83</sup> Cassidy and Tichenor were members of the Ragtime Society, and though they made no explicit reference to it, they undoubtedly knew of the success of the Society's first "bash" in December 1964. Perhaps motivated by that event, the two made plans for a similar get-together in August 1965 in St. Louis on the

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<sup>79</sup> "1964 Directory," *The RagTime Review*, April 1964, 10.

<sup>80</sup> "Letters from Our Readers," *The RagTime Review*, April 1964, 4.

<sup>81</sup> "Letters," *The RagTime Review*, January 1965, 3.

<sup>82</sup> *The RagTime Review*, January 1966, 11.

<sup>83</sup> Trebor Tichenor, "Goldenrod Showboat Re-Opening Soon on St. Louis Levee," *The RagTime Review*, April 1965, 12.



recently refurbished Goldenrod Showboat. The 1909 riverboat had been built exclusively for the purpose of entertaining; it featured an ample stage overlooking a large mezzanine and balcony that together could accommodate several hundred patrons seated at dining tables. (The boat itself boasted a 1400 person capacity.<sup>84</sup>) Like other showboats, it was not a powered boat; in its heyday, it had been towed up and down the Mississippi River, docking for several days at each town to present entertainment for the local audiences.<sup>85</sup> The Goldenrod retired from traveling service in 1937 and was docked permanently in St. Louis where it fell into disrepair until it was bought in the early 1960s and restored to serve as the base of operations for the St. Louis Ragtimers, a six-piece jazz band in which Tichenor played piano.<sup>86</sup> Because the Goldenrod was thus available to them, and because of its historic importance as a relic of the ragtime era, Cassidy and Tichenor felt that it would be the ideal location for their ragtime festival, and they expressed their “hope that this beautiful old boat will become a ragtime mecca.”<sup>87</sup> Their colleagues at the Ragtime Society agreed: “We couldn’t ask for a more...colorful and authentic setting than the Goldenrod. Kick ‘em up high, and keep ‘em flyin’!”<sup>88</sup>

The first St. Louis Ragtime Festival took place aboard the Goldenrod Showboat from Friday, 13 August to Sunday, 15 August 1965.<sup>89</sup> The Ragtime Society newsletter called it “the event of the summer.”<sup>90</sup> Some 300 people attended,<sup>91</sup> including John Arpin, a

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<sup>84</sup> The St. Louis Ragtimers, accessed 31 October 2015, <http://www.stlragtimers.com>.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* See also “Performers,” *The Ragtimer*, May 1965, 21.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> “Coming Events,” *The Ragtimer*, May 1965, 24.

<sup>89</sup> Trebor Tichenor, “A Report on the 1st Annual Ragtime Festival,” *The RagTime Review*, October 1965, 3.

<sup>90</sup> *The Ragtimer*, September 1965, 41.

<sup>91</sup> Tichenor, “A Report...,” 4.

member of the Society, who also performed at the Festival. Arpin described it colorfully for *The Ragtimer*:

Any ragtimers who chose to do other things when this exciting Ragtime Festival was taking place really did miss something...It was three days of excellent ragtime, meeting the devotees of this colorful music, and sheer good fun. High point of the Festival was the fine Saturday afternoon performance. It consisted of a color slide program with amusing commentary by the Ragtimers' own Al Stricker. Interspersed were tape interviews with Arthur Marshall and the playing of classic rags as their original sheet music covers flashed on the screen.<sup>92</sup>

In *The RagTime Review*, Tichenor reported that six pianists had performed, including himself, John Arpin, John "Knocky" Parker, Tom Shea, Bob Wright, and Michael Montgomery, in addition to singers, banjoists, clarinetists, and the St. Louis Ragtimers. While the focus was on "classic" piano ragtime including works by all three of ragtime's "Big Three" (Scott Joplin, Joseph Lamb, James Scott), the festival also included a number of selections from the standard "traditional jazz" repertory such as "Dippermouth Blues," "Steamboat Stomp," "Snake Rag," and even sentimental ballads of the 1890s like "In the Baggage Coach Ahead."<sup>93</sup> The success of the first festival prompted another the following year, and the St. Louis Ragtime Festival aboard the Goldenrod Showboat became a regular annual event through 1989.<sup>94</sup>

At the start of *The RagTime Review's* fifth year, Cassidy reflected on the primary goals he and Tichenor had had for the magazine: "our aim was to disseminate news of interest to ragophiles at a reasonable cost; to make our private collections available as reproduced copies and to perform any other services, ragwise, commensurate with our

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<sup>92</sup> John Arpin, *The Ragtimer*, September 1965, 41.

<sup>93</sup> Tichenor, "A Report..." 4.

<sup>94</sup> Following the sale of the Goldenrod Showboat by the Pierson family in early 1990, no further St. Louis Ragtime Festivals were held. See "St Louis Fest Postponed," *The Rag Times*, March 1990.

spare time and abilities...We feel we have done what we started out to do."<sup>95</sup> In the April 1966 issue, Cassidy announced rather abruptly that it would be the *Review's* last. Though only 40 years old, Cassidy was terminally ill and Tichenor determined that he could not carry on the *Review* by himself.<sup>96</sup> Cassidy forwarded to the Ragtime Society in Toronto a number of unpublished articles that he and others had written for the *Review* in hopes that they might be published in the Society's own newsletter. Cassidy died in Denver on 4 July 1966. With the demise of *The RagTime Review*, the Ragtime Society's *Ragtimer* became the ragtime community's only regular publication until the founding of the Maple Leaf Club in Los Angeles and its newsletter *The Rag Times* in 1967.

### 3.4 THE RAGTIME SOCIETY AND *THE RAGTIMER* (1962-1986)

*There was also, I felt, much isolated effort to find out more about Ragtime, and certainly there was interest in it...I feel that those of us who are genuinely interested in preserving what was good, should do our best to assist those people who are struggling in the dark without direction, as most of us once were, and a lot of us still are.*

JIM KINNEAR<sup>97</sup>

When the Ragtime Society was founded there in 1962, Toronto was already well known to ragtime enthusiasts everywhere as something of a hotbed of ragtime activity. The very first issue of *The RagTime Review* in January 1962 estimated that "Toronto has more

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<sup>95</sup> *The RagTime Review*, January 1966, 13.

<sup>96</sup> Jack Cuff, "The Ragtime Society Incorporated, A Time for Recapitulation, 1962-1972," *The Ragtimer*, November 1972, 9.

<sup>97</sup> Jim Kinnear, "Special Events," *The Ragtime Society [Newsletter]*, August 1962, 5.

ragophiles per square mile than any other city”<sup>98</sup>—something most attributed to the efforts of Robert (Bob) Darch.<sup>99</sup> Darch, who traveled widely as a ragtime pianist and entertainer, lived for a time in Toronto and had connections with Club 76 (so named for its address, 76 St. Clair Street West), a dining lounge where he performed regularly beginning in 1959.<sup>100</sup> For many among the nightclub’s clientele, “ragtime” was a “new word,” recalled Club 76 regular Jim Kinnear, “certainly the type of music played was new to our ears.”<sup>101</sup> Darch’s charisma and exuberance soon won him a loyal following of ragtime devotees,<sup>102</sup> and as audiences grew, he was encouraged to invite such other ragtime notables as Joseph Lamb, Eubie Blake, Max Morath, and Johnny Maddox to join him for performances at Club 76.<sup>103</sup> With such direct and visceral connection to some of the ragtime era’s most celebrated composers and the revival era’s most popular entertainers, many of the regular Club 76 attendees “soon fell under the spell of ragtime and its classical overtones,” recalled Jack Cuff.<sup>104</sup>

In the 1950s, Darch had been something of a ragtime “Johnny Appleseed,” an itinerant performer stirring up ragtime interest wherever he went and rallying locals to collective activism for the benefit of ragtime (and presumably himself as well). Although they proved to be short-lived, he had successfully lobbied for the establishment of

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<sup>98</sup> *The RagTime Review*, January 1962, 4.

<sup>99</sup> Carol Binkowski, *Joseph F. Lamb: A Passion for Ragtime* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 171.

<sup>100</sup> Ted Tjaden, “Ragtime Music in Canada,” accessed 24 October 2015, <http://www.ragtimepiano.ca/rags/can5.htm>. See also “From the Secretary’s Desk” in *The Ragtimer*, March 1965, 1. Darch’s following at Club 76 seems to have been sufficiently strong that when a new Club 76 was opened in Winnipeg in May 1962, Darch was sent to be its opening act. See *The Ragtimer*, June 1962, 3.

<sup>101</sup> “From the Secretary’s Desk,” *The Ragtimer*, March 1965, 9.

<sup>102</sup> W. J. McCrostie, “Club 76,” *The Ragtimer*, November 1972, 26.

<sup>103</sup> Jack Cuff, “The Ragtime Society Incorporated: A Time for Recapitulation 1962-1972,” *The Ragtimer*, November 1972, 11.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

memorial foundations for several notable ragtime composers (Scott Joplin in Sedalia, Missouri; Percy Wenrich in Joplin, Missouri; and John William “Blind” Boone in Columbia, Missouri<sup>105</sup>), and in Toronto, he again urged his followers to act upon their newfound enthusiasm and organize efforts to “find, preserve and further promote the music.”<sup>106</sup> It is unclear whether Darch or his Club 76 “regulars” were aware of Paul Affeldt’s efforts to ignite interest in an “International Society for the Preservation of Ragtime,”<sup>107</sup> but casual discussions among several Darch devotees in late 1961 led to a meeting on 19 January 1962 at which “The Ragtime Society” was formally established.<sup>108</sup>

The Society’s three “core” founders were not professional musicians themselves, though all were Toronto-area collectors and amateur pianists of moderate ability.<sup>109</sup> John Fisher, the Society’s initial chairman, chief publicist, and newsletter editor, had an “extensive” collection of sheet music that would provide much of the source material for the Society’s re-print efforts. Jim Kinnear, the secretary, worked for a firm specializing in commercial sealants and built up his own collection of piano rolls and sheet music on frequent business trips. With no formal piano lessons, he taught himself to play ragtime by listening to Bob Darch records.<sup>110</sup> Idamay MacInnes acted as the Society’s treasurer; she and husband Allen operated a wholesale outlet for domestic and imported furniture and

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<sup>105</sup> Russell Cassidy and Trebor Tichenor, “A Brief Summary of Ragtime Events from the 1940’s,” *The RagTime Review*, April 1962, 4.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Paul Affeldt, *Jazz Report*, 1961. Reprinted in *The Rag Times*, January 1982, 1-2.

<sup>108</sup> Cuff, 11.

<sup>109</sup> “From the Secretary’s Desk,” 10.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

fabrics. Idamay had had “extensive” classical training as a pianist and was reported to play and sight read well enough to perform duets with Max Morath on his visits to Toronto.<sup>111</sup>

From its inception, the Ragtime Society promoted itself to ragtime enthusiasts worldwide, even if it seems to have concentrated its efforts to win new ragtime converts locally. Early efforts to attract members from beyond the Toronto area included a notice in the inaugural issue of *The RagTime Review*<sup>112</sup> and a one-page letter from John Fisher sent to all persons already known to the Society’s founders to be interested in ragtime. In Toronto, the Society promoted itself at Club 76, on local TV, and at area ragtime concerts and events.<sup>113</sup> One particular orchestral concert in memory of Joseph Lamb, organized by Bob Darch and held in Toronto’s Massey Hall on 4 May 1962, drew a capacity crowd of over 2,500 despite poor promotion and “ever-changing dates.”<sup>114</sup> Though the performances (by members of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra) received mixed reviews, the audience was reported to be “very enthusiastic” and the event likely contributed to an early swell in Ragtime Society membership.<sup>115</sup> By the end of the Society’s first year, it counted over two hundred members.<sup>116</sup> One member from Ohio expressed his pleasure in joining the Society:

When I first received word about The Ragtime Society I practically did hand stands because I thought here is a group of individuals devoted to an American music which, although it was associated by its very name with wickedness in its infancy and was hardly taken as a serious music even during its period of popularity, and only a few years ago was all but

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *The RagTime Review*, January 1962, 4.

<sup>113</sup> “From the Secretary’s Desk,” 11.

<sup>114</sup> *The Ragtimer*, June 1962, 1.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> “Stop the Press News,” *The Ragtime Society [Newsletter]*, February 1963, 7.

forgotten, only a quaint name from the distant (?) past, deserves to be preserved as part of our heritage.<sup>117</sup>

Though it boasted a “cleaner,” more streamlined appearance, early issues of the Ragtime Society’s (as yet unnamed) newsletter largely paralleled the efforts of *The RagTime Review*, but with a somewhat more formal tone and a greater emphasis on advice for the procurement of ragtime sheet music and recordings. (In 1967, the Society formally titled its newsletter *The Ragtimer*. For convenience, clarity, and consistency, I will refer to it henceforth by that name, even for pre-1967 issues.<sup>118</sup>) The first *Ragtimer*, in February 1962 consisted entirely of a listing of books, sheet music, and records that Fisher and his colleagues deemed of interest, with brief reviews and ordering information. Presuming that members might have difficulty in obtaining many of the items, the Society offered to sell any of the items listed by mail order. Because the distribution of ragtime materials constituted one of the Ragtime Society’s primary goals, for the duration of its existence, the Society sought arrangements with publishers and distributors to offer books, sheet music, and records directly to its members, eventually printing a yearly catalogue.

In the February 1963 *Ragtimer*, at the end of its first year, the Society reported the findings of a survey mailed to all members with the intent of gauging their interests. With just under half of all members responding to the survey, the Society found that 74% of respondents owned a piano, and 75% played piano (though fewer than 10% claimed to do so professionally); 86% were “solidly behind” the Society’s sheet music reprint efforts, with most of them buying the music to use; only 16% identified themselves primarily as

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<sup>117</sup> “From Our Readers,” *The Ragtimer*, March 1965, 18.

<sup>118</sup> I also refer to the Society’s newsletter in all citations as *The Ragtimer*, though those prior to April 1967 did not actually bear the title.

collectors; 76% expressed interest in acquiring ragtime LPs, and 61% were interested in LPs of piano rolls. The survey results provide a rare (if superficial) glimpse into the kinds of people who made up the Society's membership. If the Society's founders were avid collectors, its members seem to have been largely amateur pianists who enjoyed playing ragtime, and who sought sheet music and recordings less for any inherent "collectible value" and more for their usefulness as source material and instructional tools.

Even as it acted as a distributor of commercial products, communications from the Society to its members stressed that it was not to be a profit-making venture, but rather an effort—through collective action—to "preserve" and "disseminate as much information as possible on this music."<sup>119</sup> Chairman John Fisher's initial letter to prospective members indicated that any funds collected would be used for the primary purpose of printing and mailing monthly newsletters as well as producing sheet music reprints and piano roll recuts. The Society quickly made good on its promise of sheet music reprints, announcing its first offering in the first *Ragtimer*: fittingly, it was Joplin's first rag, "Original Rags." Thereafter, the Society announced one new reprint selection per month so that by January 1963 it boasted a growing catalogue of a dozen rags. By January 1970 the number was 135. Although the Society undertook publication of several newly-composed rags (most by Tom Shea) in its first two years, whether for lack of interest or the expense of having new compositions typeset,<sup>120</sup> it issued few, if any, newly-composed rags after 1964.

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<sup>119</sup> John A. Fisher, letter announcing the Ragtime Society, January 1962.

<sup>120</sup> The Ragtime Society estimated the cost of typesetting and printing a rag to be three times as much as reprinting an older rag that was already typeset. See *The Ragtimer*, October 1963.





# THE RAGTIMER

MARCH 1971

APRIL 1971

PUBLISHED BY



DEDICATED TO THE  
PRESERVATION OF  
CLASSICAL RAGTIME

*Shampce*

Figure 3.3 *The Ragtimer*

Because its sheet music re-print program was central to the Ragtime Society's activities, it may have come as a mild surprise to members when, only a year after the Society's founding, it embarked upon what Fisher referred to as its "most ambitious project"<sup>121</sup>—the establishment of a "Ragtime Society" record label to issue "authentic performances of both old and new Ragtime" (emphasis mine).<sup>122</sup> "Like many of you," wrote Fisher, addressing *Ragtimer* readers in the May 1963 issue, "Idamay, Jim, and myself have decried the fact that there are all too few good Ragtime records. They are either too fast, too ricky-tick, too arranged, or too technically augmented."<sup>123</sup> "We have produced our own L.P. record. I say that like a father would say, 'I had a baby'...I know we are prejudiced, but we all think it is a masterpiece."<sup>124</sup> The announcement came only a month after *The Ragtimer* had first mentioned the possibility of a Society-produced LP with details so vague that neither performer nor repertoire were mentioned.<sup>125</sup> The record—recorded, edited, pressed, and offered to members within a span of three months<sup>126</sup>—was by Tom Shea, a Michigan-based pianist who had only recently come to the attention of the Ragtime Society's founders.<sup>127</sup> Titled simply *Classic & Modern Rags*, one side featured Shea playing his own ragtime compositions (about which Fisher couldn't "wax poetic

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<sup>121</sup> *The Ragtimer*, May 1963, 1.

<sup>122</sup> Tom Shea, *Prairie Ragtime*, Ragtime Society Records RSR-2, 1964.

<sup>123</sup> John Fisher, "Records," *The Ragtimer*, May 1963, 1. Fisher's comment about records that were "too technically augmented" may have referred in part to a series of ragtime recordings on the Audiophile label that found pianist John "Knocky" Parker recording pieces on a host of instruments that included piano, harpsichord, and celeste, the performances spliced together so that a single piece might feature all three instruments in rapid succession.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> Fisher, "Records," 1.

<sup>126</sup> The Ragtime Society's first LP was recorded in Toronto in May 1963. See Tom Shea, *Prairie Ragtime*, Ragtime Society Records RSR-2, 1964 (unsigned liner notes).

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* Fisher comments that he had only become familiar with Shea a few months earlier, after Mike Montgomery sent him a tape of Shea's playing. In the same article, Fisher wrote "I was so overwhelmed that I 'phoned Max Morath in Denver and played part of the tape to him...that was an expensive call. We talked Tom into coming to Toronto and cutting the master tape for The Ragtime Society's first record."

enough...[e]very one is amazing”), and the reverse contained Tom Turpin’s “St. Louis Rag” along with five rags by Scott Joplin. The record’s swift production coupled with the lack of advance notice in *The Ragtimer* suggests that while the record bore the Society’s imprint, it was more of a personal project undertaken by the Society’s founders. (They admitted to having gone personally “into hock” producing the record and expressed hope that strong sales among Society members would help them to “get out from under financially.”)

Excepting Brun Campbell’s self-recorded, self-marketed 78 rpm records of the mid-to-late 1940s, the Ragtime Society’s Shea LP was the first significant recording of piano ragtime produced entirely by members of the ragtime community for their own consumption.<sup>128</sup> (It also happened to be Shea’s record debut.) Freed somewhat from the control of more commercially-minded record companies,<sup>129</sup> its content and aesthetics, while undoubtedly shaped in part by certain financial constraints, nevertheless offer valuable insight into the “vision” and musical values the Society’s leaders sought to convey. The rather plain cover, an austere, minimalist text-centric design, stood in stark contrast to the often garish and gaudy covers commercial record companies fashioned for ragtime releases. It is tempting to dismiss the cover as the product of a minuscule production budget, but given Fisher’s obvious contempt of many commercially-marketed

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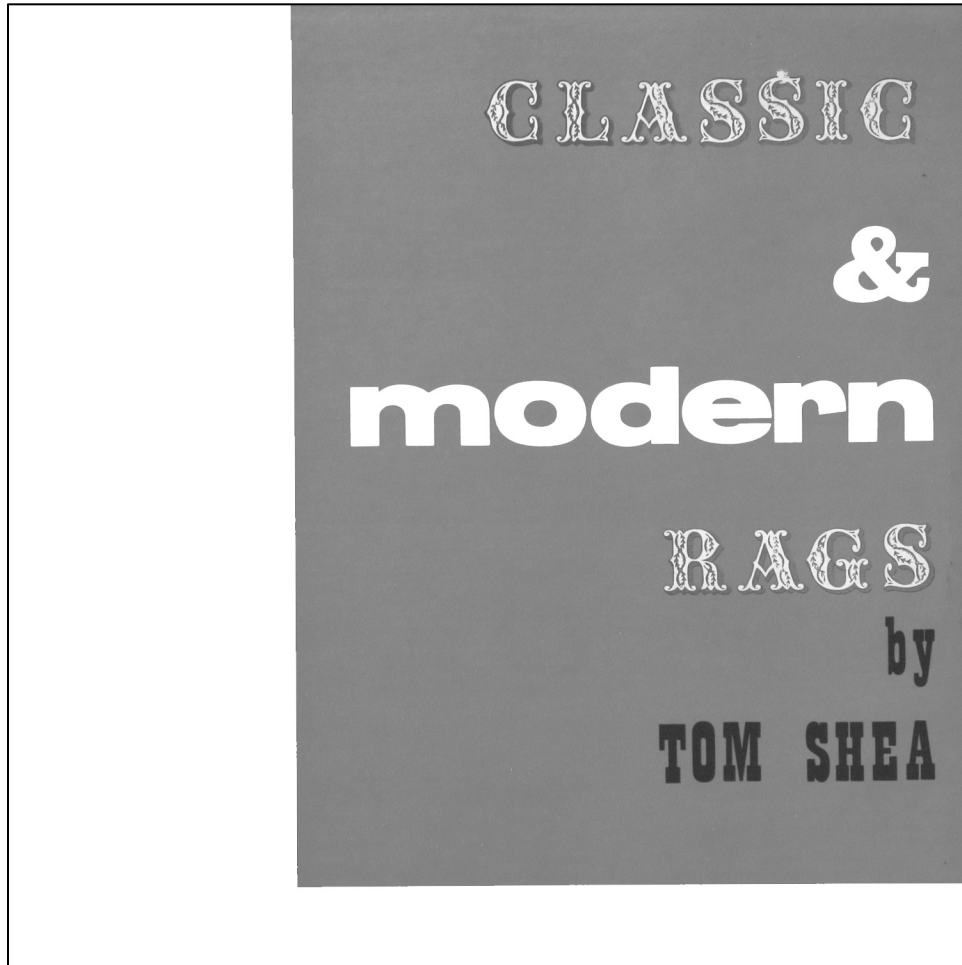
<sup>128</sup> The ubiquitousness of home tape recorders by 1963 coupled with the existence of home recordings of Joseph Lamb at the piano (made in 1959 by both Samuel Charters and Michael Montgomery) suggest that early revivalists likely recorded and circulated home-made tapes of ragtime performances and piano rolls on a limited basis, though Shea’s LP still stands as the first concerted effort within the community to “publish” such a recording commercially.

<sup>129</sup> Max Morath, at a lecture given during the June 2012 “Blind Boone” Ragtime and Early Jazz Festival in Columbia, Missouri was especially outspoken in describing the artistic interference he faced from producers and executives at Columbia/Epic during production of his LP records in the 1960s.

ragtime records (“trash,” in his words<sup>130</sup>), the stark yet tasteful cover was likely a deliberate choice to immediately distinguish Shea’s brand of ragtime from mere “riki-tick.” In the cover’s title, the words “Classic” and “Rags” are rendered in nostalgic, highly ornamental, all-capital letters evocative of turn-of-the-century display typefaces; juxtaposed between them, “& modern” is printed in bold, white, lower-case letters, echoing a common artistic device of using all lower-case text to evoke modernity. Without resorting to the hackneyed image of a derby-wearing, cigar-smoking barroom pianist, the cover portrays the essence of ragtime’s historical associations while subtly inviting the viewer to consider contemporary ragtime not as a mere echo of the past, but as a vibrant, “modern” musical form for artistic expression. In many ways, the cover is a deceptively simple encapsulation of the Society’s guiding principles.

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<sup>130</sup> “As most of us are only too painfully aware, there are a lot of L.P.’s on the market (too many for my money) which purport to be ragtime. The buyer of most of the trash must certainly be often disappointed.” See John A. Fisher, “Records,” *The Ragtimer*, March 1963, 2.



**Figure 3.4** *Classic & Modern Rags by Tom Shea*

Shea's performances on the record, while reflecting his own idiosyncratic style, nevertheless exemplify many of the performance "ideals" that the Society sought to perpetuate. The recorded sound is "simple," straightforward and clear, unencumbered by artificial reverb or other added after-effects. The piano is most likely an upright in someone's living room, and if it isn't in the very best tune, neither is it noticeably out-of-tune. Shea plays unaccompanied solos throughout the record (except for an added tambourine on Joplin's "Stoptime Rag"), taking each piece at a moderate tempo with crisp

articulation and minimal pedaling that allows all notes to be heard clearly. Except for Joplin's "Pine Apple Rag," he avoids the temptation to play dotted "swing" rhythms, retaining a strict, march-like feel for most. Dynamic shadings are minimal and Shea seldom strays far from the published scores, though he occasionally adds his own embellishments: mostly melodic ornamentations and contrapuntal figurations in the left hand. If Shea's performances are far from flawless (he occasionally plays wrong notes and misreads rhythms), neither the record's production team nor customers who submitted their reactions seem to have minded much.<sup>131</sup> Favorable reviews appeared in England's *Jazz Journal* and *CODA* (a Canadian jazz magazine), the latter advising readers that "[a]nyone remotely interested in ragtime (the real thing, that is) will want to own this recording."<sup>132</sup> Pat Cather, writing in *Jazz Report*, described it as "an album of classic rags played as they should be played—enthusiastically, with freshness and vividness, no serious deviations from the original score, no cuts in the score, and played neither too fast nor too slow...This is the only recording of classic ragtime I have ever enjoyed."<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> In the months following release of *Classic & Modern Rags*, *The Ragtimer* proudly printed a number of reader-submitted reviews. One commented that Shea plays "rags as I like them played, very lively." Another wrote "I just love that record of Tom Shea. I think he's the greatest," and still another "C'est, je crois, le meilleur 'Ragtime Revivalist.'" Russell Cassidy and Trebor Tichenor at *The RagTime Review* wrote that "Shea has done an astonishing job of capturing the ragtime idiom in the midwestern tradition...no 'stride' or modern sounds here." Nearly a year after the record's release, *The Ragtimer* reported having received only two negative reviews—"amongst dozens of approval". *The Ragtimer* quoted one unidentified writer who "in no uncertain terms (6 pages) [stated that] 'this record is positively the WORST, positively the most sickening, and positively despicable all around. The music is in the junk category, and the style of playing in the itinerant category, etc., etc.'" (See "L.P. Records," *The Ragtimer*, March 1964, 21.) The magazine also summarized "a very long letter from Percy Franks who insists that...[it] is not ragtime in any sense of the word, is played too slow, is monotonous in that all the tunes sound the same etc." Franks had been an outspoken critic of "classic" ragtime and young revivalists in general in the pages of *The RagTime Review*. See "L.P. Records," *The Ragtimer*, October 1963, 7.

<sup>132</sup> "Tom Shea," *CODA*, January 1964, n.p.

<sup>133</sup> Pat Cather, "Tom Shea: Classic and Modern Rags," *Music Memories/Jazz Report*, 1964, n.p., reproduced in *The Ragtimer*, June 1964, 43.

Exact sales figures for *Classic & Modern Rags* are unavailable, but by January 1964, seven months after the record's release, *The Ragtimer* reported that enough had been sold to cover expenses "and pay Tom a modest royalty."<sup>134</sup> The financial and critical success it enjoyed spurred the Society's directors to pursue a second LP by Tom Shea the following year.<sup>135</sup> Recorded in Toronto on 1 August 1964 and titled *Prairie Ragtime*, it followed much the same format as the first, with a side of ragtime-era compositions and a side of Tom Shea's original compositions. While the recorded sound is largely the same as the first LP, Shea's playing is more assured: tempos are slightly brisker and the playing more accurate. Though the cover depicts Shea at the piano, it twists or eschews many of the conventions then still widely associated with "honky-tonk" covers. The full-cover photograph, in soft focus, is rendered in black and white with exaggerated contrast. Shea's face in profile, largely obscured by shadow, appears as a crescent at the heart of the image, a cigarette in his mouth. The vague, blurred outline of what appears to be a beer or liquor bottle is visible in the distance. Curiously, though Shea (dressed in a checkered button-up shirt) is obviously seated at a piano, his hands, the keyboard, and outline of the piano itself are not visible, either blurred beyond recognition or beyond the image's borders. A piece of sheet music sits on the piano's stand, its title nearly illegible because of the soft focus.<sup>136</sup> The simple title "Tom Shea Prairie Ragtime" is nestled unobtrusively in the lower right-hand corner. If the cover for *Classic & Modern Rags* had subtly heralded the arrival of "ragtime"—the genre—as an art music, the cover for *Prairie Ragtime* introduced the modern ragtime composer-pianist as artist.

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<sup>134</sup> "Records," *The Ragtimer*, January 1964, 4.

<sup>135</sup> Shea, *Prairie Ragtime*.

<sup>136</sup> The title appears to be "Prairie Queen," one of Shea's original compositions recorded on his first LP.



**Figure 3.5 *Prairie Ragtime* and *Monk***

Though *Prairie Ragtime* predated Thelonious Monk's LP *Monk* (Columbia CL-2291) by several months and the two were almost certainly conceived and executed without knowledge of the other, the similarity between the covers of the two records is striking. The *Monk* cover may not be particularly noteworthy in its invocation of a number of "jazz art world" clichés, but their application in the cover of Shea's LP is reflective of the Ragtime Society's desire to re-fashion ragtime as a "serious" music produced by "serious" artists: artists whose authority and "authenticity"—as in the jazz world—is not measured in terms of formal training, but in terms of inherent "genius" and experience. Both covers depict their subjects in pensive gazes, cigarettes dangling nonchalantly, seemingly unaware of the camera. The viewer is presumed to know that both are solo pianists seated at a piano, yet in each case, the exclusion of the piano, its keyboard, and the performer's hands from the field of view directs the viewer's attention to the performer's visage as if to suggest that the pianist's true worth lies not in his dexterity or virtuosity, but in his creative



*mind*, the source of his expressive individuality. Both Shea and Monk are composers as well as performers. The hazy, shadowy, black-and-white composition of each image suggests an air of mystery and detachment about the subject; the source of his musical thought and creative impulse is known to him alone—he exists in a separate musical world of his own making. The unsigned liner notes that appear on the back of *Prairie Ragtime* reinforce the message conveyed by its cover—that to fully respect and understand ragtime’s past, one must be willing to embrace its *present* as represented by those, like Shea, who continue to innovate within its realm: “While playing the old Rags preserves the purity of Ragtime, composing new rags insures vitality. If Ragtime, or any art form, fails to attract new contributors it becomes a static echo of the past with no import for today except as tradition.”<sup>137</sup> In scarcely a dozen years, the ragtime revival movement had transformed from one whose champions and foremost exponents were historical figures of the turn-of-the-century to one that celebrated its relevance and vitality through younger and more “modern” composers and performers.

In describing the Ragtime Society’s recording efforts, John Fisher wrote “[w]e are not aiming for the mass market; we are catering, we feel to a very select group with discriminating tastes most of whom are in the process of learning...[W]e will choose numbers which are not generally as well known as Dill Pickles, 12<sup>th</sup> St, Original Rags, etc. We hope to give you something different.”<sup>138</sup> Nevertheless, from the start, the Ragtime Society saw in its LP releases a powerful outreach tool. Liner notes and inserts carried notices about the Society, and the Society arranged for the records to be sold in shops

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<sup>137</sup> Shea, *Prairie Ragtime*.

<sup>138</sup> “7” vs. 12” L.P.’s,” *The Ragtimer*, March 1964, 21.

both domestically and abroad.<sup>139</sup> Ragtime Society LPs were sent to large and small music magazines for review. Tex Wyndham, who later became *The Ragtimer's* regular record reviewer as well as master of ceremonies at its annual "Bash" commented that he first became aware of the Society after reading a review of one of the Tom Shea LPs in *High Fidelity*.<sup>140</sup> Recognizing the marketing value of well-produced ragtime LPs, from 1963 to 1969, the Ragtime Society produced, co-produced, or sponsored eight LPs under its own name and under the label names "Scroll Records" and "Arpeggio Records." See Table 3.01 for a listing of all Ragtime Society record releases.

**Table 3.1 LP records produced by the Ragtime Society<sup>141</sup>**

<b>Release</b>	<b>Artist</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Production</b>
RSR-01	Tom Shea	Classic & Modern Rags	1963	Society Produced Record
RSR-02	Tom Shea	Prairie Ragtime	1964	Society Produced Record
RSR-03	John Arpin	Concert in Ragtime	1965	Cooperatively Produced Record
RSR-04	Charlie Rasch	Ragtime Down the Line	1966	Society Produced Record
RSR-05	Trebor Tichenor	Mississippi Valley Ragtime	1966	Independently Produced Record
RSR-06	John Arpin	The Other Side of Ragtime	1966	Cooperatively Produced Record
RSR-07	Max Morath Quartet	The Entertainer	1968	Independently Produced Record
RSR-08	Lois Delano	The Music of Joe Jordan	1968	Cooperatively Produced Record

<sup>139</sup> *The Ragtimer*, July 1964, 46.

<sup>140</sup> Tex Wyndham, interview with the author, 25 October 2015. See *High Fidelity*, March 1965, 128. (The review was written by Ragtime Society member John S. Wilson.)

<sup>141</sup> The designations of "Society Produced Record," "Cooperatively Produced Record," and "Independently Produced Record" are noted in Ragtime Society catalogues, even though such production categories are never explained. Based on my own experience producing and releasing ragtime recordings with various performers, I suggest that such categories identify the party or parties either financially or artistically responsible for each album. "Society Produced" would seem to indicate that the Ragtime Society's board members commissioned a performer to record an album, overseeing production and covering expenses while retaining all rights to the finished product. "Cooperatively Produced" suggests that the performer and the Society shared financial and artistic responsibilities as well as ownership of the finished product, while "Independently Produced" likely indicates that the performer oversaw most aspects of production and shouldered any financial burdens, licensing the finished recording to the Society for purposes of distribution.

Early issues of *The Ragtimer* were relatively brief and emphasized the Society's role as a "distribution center" for ragtime product and information. Besides selling its own and others' commercially-produced music folios and records, *The Ragtimer* soon included reprints (sometimes re-typed, but often facsimiles) of radio and TV scripts for ragtime-themed programs, old and recent magazine and newspaper clippings of ragtime interest, as well as articles on ragtime topics previously published elsewhere, many submitted by Society members. Performer profiles and published ragtime concert reviews were popular subjects, serving to better acquaint *The Ragtimer's* scattered readers with each other. Full-length articles from *The Record Changer*, *Jazz Journal*, and even *The RagTime Review*, some of them twenty or thirty years old, served as reminders of ragtime's recent past and offered nostalgic memories for many readers while also providing a common knowledge base to supplement *They All Played Ragtime*, which in the Society's early years was still the only major book on ragtime and, it seems, the only presumed ragtime resource common to most members besides *The Ragtimer*. Through its final issue in 1986, *The Ragtimer* acted as a clearinghouse for member-submitted ragtime ephemera.

*The Ragtimer* also published original articles on a variety of topics ranging from musical analyses of selected rags, to opinion and advice columns, to biographical sketches of both well-known and obscure composers and performers, to concert, festival, and record reviews. While the *The RagTime Review* had tackled many of these same topics, as the product of two like-minded enthusiasts (Russell Cassidy and Trebor Tichenor) who wrote most of the material they published, the *Review* exhibited a greater consistency of opinion than did *The Ragtimer*. As the house organ of a larger, more

formally conducted organization, *The Ragtimer* collected and published the writings of many more contributors and guests, each bringing a different perspective, a different set of aesthetic preferences, and thus a different “voice” to its pages. If in its first two years *The Ragtimer* had largely reflected the views and preferences of its chairman, John Fisher, and of his co-founders, Jim Kinnear and Idamay MacInnes, by the middle 1960s the variety of opinions expressed in its pages by “staff” and “guest” writers alike make the magazine’s “character” more difficult to gauge.

Capitalizing on the diverse opinions of its readers, to provoke debate and enliven its pages, *The Ragtimer* occasionally printed deliberately controversial writings. In 1966 and 1967, Tom Shea contributed a regular column titled “Winging It,” so called because Shea described himself as prepared with only “a 1947 Smith-Corona typewriter, two copies of THEY ALL PLAYED RAGTIME, and a lot of nerve.”<sup>142</sup> By expressing his own opinions about how to play ragtime, and by quoting others’ comments on the subject, he hoped to elicit the response of Society members who may have felt themselves unequipped for serious historical debate or who previously felt themselves unwilling to commit strong emotions or opinions to print. “It will be a ragtime bull session, a soapbox, a words and paper psychiatric couch... You don’t have to be an authority or have any kind of ragtime credentials to get in on the fun,” Shea promised. An excerpt from a somewhat contentious anonymous letter that he printed as part of his first column illustrates the fractured opinion of Ragtime Society members behind the façade of *The Ragtimer* and its notion of “classical ragtime”:

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<sup>142</sup> Tom Shea, “Winging It,” *The Ragtimer*, June 1966, 25.

You think the red vested, eleven fingered rag smasher was bad—goodbye ragtime! What about guys like Joplin and their lace curtain cool rags for piano playing old ladies and lily ears who want to feel a little sporty—goodbye ragtime! That’s right, mother, just play as written. No swing—it’s vulgar. No sweat, sit up straight, and that’s the way you play the rags. It sounds like chamber music with just a touch of bordello.

Pity the poor ragtime. As soon as the old ladies quit feeling playful, that was it. Nobody else was interested. The stuff was too unreal, too arty for the people who had picked ragtime on banjos, thumped it out on old upright pianos, danced to it, sang it, and loved it. Neither did it belong to the conservatory crowd. It was too naive. When they acknowledged its existence at all, it was with a pretty-good-considering-where-it-came-from pat on the head, or a more honest kick in the pants.

So while the old ladies sat in their front parlors playing cool ragtime, the rest of the ragtime world went by outside, marching behind a jazz band playing ragtime; or down to the corner saloon where “Jelly Roll” Morton, Charlie Thompson, James P. Johnson, and ten million other “ticklers” were beating out the real stuff. Jazz-ragtime, ragtime-jazz, it was all the same. Maybe the rags had more parts—sure, but you played them your way, whether they had four strains or just one. They knew that the music belonged to them, the performers and their audiences—not to the composers, and that all the instructions necessary for playing them should come from their own ability and idea of good form.

Today 60 years later, things haven’t changed much. The conservatories still aren’t interested, the old ladies and their starch-backed cohorts are still playing rags straight and trying to get everybody else to do it their way, and the real ragtime performers—although few in number—are still playing real ragtime (thank goodness).<sup>143</sup>

The highlights the two extremes in the hotly contested issue of whether an “authentic” ragtime performance meant a clean, literal rendition of a published score or a more personalized re-working with plenty of embellishments, improvisation, and re-arranging, the comment that the music “belonged to...the performers...not to the composers” strongly suggesting the latter. The author derisively refers to any who would follow a

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<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

published score too closely as “old ladies,” a gendered and ageist slur probably meant to recall the more musically conservative, polite “parlor” piano teachers who, for all their training, presumably did not understand the essence of ragtime. The author also alludes to the oft-debated topic of ragtime tempos, juxtaposing “cool” (presumably slow) ragtime with “real ragtime performers” who “thump” it out.

*The Ragtimer's* longest-running “feature” was Tex Wyndham’s column of ragtime record reviews, which ran from 1966 through *The Ragtimer's* final issue in 1986. Wyndham, a well-respected pianist and cornetist in the ragtime community himself, was disappointed with the production and editing of a record by “Knocky” Parker, another well-known pianist in the ragtime community, and his purchase prompted him to write a detailed critique of the disc which he sent to *The Ragtimer*.<sup>144</sup> Wyndham was especially bothered by Parker’s substitution of the harpsichord and celeste for the piano on some selections—instruments which he felt gave the music at turns an “archaic, fuzzy sound” and a “delicate...almost effeminate sound.”<sup>145</sup> As his first review suggests, Wyndham’s penchant for lively, “robust” ragtime came to dominate his reviews, and he championed those recordings by performers who played ragtime cleanly, accurately, and—if not always exactly by the printed score—without excessive improvisation or embellishment. In such a relatively small musical community in which performers, audiences, and reviewers knew each other personally, Wyndham and *The Ragtimer's* other guest reviewers often sought to remain diplomatic in even the most unfavorable reviews.

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<sup>144</sup> Tex Wyndham, interview with the author, 25 October 2015. See also “Record Review,” *The Ragtimer*, November 1966, 48. The 4-record set that prompted Wyndham’s initial review was *Golden Treasury of Ragtime* by John W. “Knocky” Parker (Audiophile AP-89, -90, -91, and -92).

<sup>145</sup> Tex Wyndham, “Record Review,” *The Ragtimer*, November 1966, 49.

Reviewers like Wyndham seldom lambasted a recording; he explains: "I tried to write my reviews with enough detail and objectivity so that readers could decide for themselves if a record was something that they would enjoy."<sup>146</sup> Wyndham's reviews occasionally invited critiques of their own, one more means by which *The Ragtimer* sought to elicit reader response and stimulate ragtime conversation.<sup>147</sup>

Besides stirring up expressions of opinion from its members, *The Ragtimer* served the cause of more scholarly research as well, publishing essays on a host of ragtime-related topics. It was not only an outlet for the publication of ragtime research, but a valuable tool for conducting research as well, providing researchers the opportunity to tap the collective knowledge of its many members. When Terry Waldo was writing his book *This is Ragtime* (Hawthorn, 1976), he appealed to readers of *The Ragtimer* for help in assembling information related to (then) recent happenings in the "ragtime field."<sup>148</sup> Similarly, when Joseph Scotti was preparing his PhD dissertation on the life and works of Joseph Lamb, he turned to *The Ragtimer's* readers, seeking "ragtimers who have letters, tapes, or other memorabilia of Joe Lamb."<sup>149</sup>

Like *The RagTime Review*, *The Ragtimer* devoted considerable space to discussion of its members' travels, meetings, and activities in an effort to not only acknowledge and document ragtime "happenings," but to introduce the Society's members to each other as

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<sup>146</sup> Wyndham, interview.

<sup>147</sup> Following an earlier unfavorable review of two "Knocky" Parker records in the December 1964 issue of *The Ragtimer* (which reviewer Bob Ashforth also criticized as being too "dainty" and not "robust" enough), *The Ragtimer* received a "flood of letters," prompting the comment: "We are delighted to have stirred up this discussion...Record reviews, personality profiles, playing dates—these are what the Newsletter is for, and this is an open invitation to you to contribute." See "Comment," *The Ragtimer*, March 1965, 13.

<sup>148</sup> "Letters," *The Ragtimer*, July 1975, 14.

<sup>149</sup> "Letters," *The Ragtimer*, September 1975, 16.

well. A three-month expedition to the United States and Canada by Swedish ragtime enthusiast (and Society member) Peter Lundberg in the spring of 1963 was well-documented in *The Ragtimer*, which not only chronicled Lundberg's "Ragtime Itinerary" (including meetings with Bill Mitchell and Fred Hoepfner in California, Charlie Thompson and "the enthusiastic group" in St. Louis, Idamay and Allen MacInnes in Toronto, and Amelia Lamb in New York), but also included comments on Lundberg's "delightful" character and "authoritative" pianistic abilities.<sup>150</sup>

Although it reported the activities of its members, the Ragtime Society does not seem to have been as eager to directly connect its many members with each other as Cassidy and Tichenor at *The RagTime Review*. While the *Review* actively encouraged its members to get to know each other, publishing a member directory with home addresses and phone numbers to facilitate meet-ups, the Ragtime Society took a more reserved approach, seemingly for reasons of personal privacy. Although a number of members requested one,<sup>151</sup> *The Ragtimer* did not publish a directory, though it occasionally supplied upon request a listing of nearby ragtime enthusiasts.<sup>152</sup> Still, over the course of the Society's first two years, many members expressed interest in Society-sponsored get-togethers in the Toronto area.<sup>153</sup> After attempts to organize such events in May and December 1962 "fell quite flat"<sup>154</sup> for unexplained reasons, further plans for a Society get-together were suspended until December 1964, when the Society successfully held its first

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<sup>150</sup> Idamay MacInnes, "The Lundberg Story," *The Ragtimer*, May 1963, 5.

<sup>151</sup> "From Our Readers," *The Ragtimer*, December 1963, 3.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*



“Bash” at the Toronto home of Jim Kinnear, the Society’s secretary.<sup>155</sup> Kinnear’s wife, Holly, had died prematurely in August 1964, leaving him the single father of two boys aged 12 and 16.<sup>156</sup> *The Ragtimer* had made prominent note of her passing, and it is tempting to suppose that the success of the get-together was at least in part the result of Society members wishing to console him and his sons at a difficult time. In addition to the five hosts, *The Ragtimer* reported thirty-eight guests in attendance; most were from the Toronto area, but some had traveled from parts of New York and Michigan for the event.<sup>157</sup> For the occasion, Kinnear’s basement was playfully renamed “The Red Carpet Saloon,” but twenty-four photographs of the event published in *The Ragtimer*<sup>158</sup> show it to have been a rather small, plainly decorated wood-paneled room with a few unframed reproductions of ragtime sheet music covers affixed to the walls and two upright pianos against walls. The guests, most appearing to be between the ages of 20 and 50, are uniformly clad in formal attire, a gesture seemingly at odds with the “Saloon” theme; men wear suits and ties, women don fashionable dresses. No attempt seems to have been made to evoke “ragtime era” dress—a feature that would become common practice at other ragtime events and even later Society bashes. Only a third of the twenty-four photographs show pianists in performance; the unnamed photographer seems to have been more concerned with photographing and documenting as many of the attendees as possible, most shown with coffee cups or wine glasses in hand, conversing with each other in groups of three or four. Most attendees wear name tags, suggesting that many of those in

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<sup>155</sup> *The Ragtimer*, January 1965, 1.

<sup>156</sup> *The Ragtimer*, September 1964, 1.

<sup>157</sup> *The Ragtimer*, January 1965, 2.

<sup>158</sup> *The Ragtimer*, January 1965.

attendance may not have known each other previously, except, perhaps through the pages of *The Ragtimer*. While the event was largely a social event, descriptions of it published after the fact in *The Ragtimer* and *The RagTime Review* reveal that many of those present were also musicians: “both pianos were going full blast until the party broke up shortly before sunrise.”<sup>159</sup> Some of those present sang, one played clarinet, and Tom Shea brought along his sousaphone. The all-night “jam session” included some classic rags, but many of the tunes played came from standard “traditional jazz” repertoire: “Doctor Jazz,” “Bill Bailey,” “Clarinet Marmalade,” and “King Porter Stomp.”

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<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*



13. Bonnie Roberts, Walt Gower, Babs Black, Jack Cuff, Don Burns



14. John Goddard, Norm Swail, Bob Ashforth



15. Bill Chestnut, Don Burns, Nick Viggiano



16. "When Ragtime Rosie Ragged the Rosary . . ."



17. Walt Gower, Jessie Swail, Jim Kinnear



18. Pat Black, Allen MacInnes, Paul Mason

**Figure 3.6 Photos from the 1964 Ragtime Society "Bash"**  
 (From *The Ragtimer*, January 1965, p. 5)

Following the success of the 1964 get-together, the Ragtime Society hosted a “bash” annually in the Toronto area, usually in the fall. From 1965 to 1967 the bashes were held in the private homes of Society members, but as the gatherings grew larger and more organized, they moved: first to St. Jude’s Church Hall (1968), to Bayview Golf and Country Club (1969), to York University (1970), and then for many years to the Cara Inn (1971-1986) where the bash became a three-day event. From 38 attendees in 1964, attendance at the bash climbed steadily in subsequent years; the 1970 bash attracted a “sellout” crowd of 300,<sup>160</sup> and at its peak in 1974—attributable almost certainly to the success early that year of *The Sting*—the bash drew upwards of 400.<sup>161</sup> Even in its later years (1984 to 1986), the bash continued to regularly attract some 300 ragtime enthusiasts annually.<sup>162</sup> Tex Wyndham, who served as master of ceremonies at Ragtime Society bashes from 1970 through 1979 recalls that the annual event was “probably the premier gathering of ragtimers in the world,” adding that “I never had so much fun in my life.”<sup>163</sup> George Foley of Cleveland, Ohio, who began attending and performing at the Society’s bashes as a teenager in 1976, recalls the atmosphere, chuckling as he describes performers and attendees “shaking with excitement...almost like they were on crack.”<sup>164</sup> For many there, it was the only opportunity to get together each year with other ragtime enthusiasts to meet and visit, to share musical discoveries, to perform before an appreciative audience, and to witness a variety of other performers. Jack Hutton, *The*

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<sup>160</sup> “The Ragtime Society Bash,” *The Ragtimer*, November 1970, 13.

<sup>161</sup> “Ragtime...Under Your Hat,” *The Ragtimer*, November 1974, 3.

<sup>162</sup> “Ragtime...Under Your Hat,” *The Ragtimer*, November 1984, n.p.

<sup>163</sup> Tex Wyndham, interview with the author, 25 October 2015.

<sup>164</sup> George Foley, interview with the author, 2 October 2015.

*Ragtimer's* editor from 1981 to 1984, explains from a casual performer's point-of-view what it was like to play at the bash:

It's impossible for non-players to understand the nerves that can build up before your name is called: the feeling that you are about to walk a tightrope in front of 300 people, trying to recall all the tricks that can keep you up, and hoping that your hands won't tremble. In my case, I was the first called after dinner and decided on the way to the piano that I'd play "Handful of Keys." As I rose from the piano, I mentally challenged anyone in the room to top my Waller gymnastics. I didn't have long to wait because 90 seconds later (I was halfway back to my seat) a kid from Cleveland [George Foley] with horn-rimmed glasses made it sound as if I hadn't practised for a year! Right then, I took a close look, not only at George Foley, but at everyone else in the room, seeing the Ragtime Society with new eyes. Every year at the Ragtime Bash has been a similar learning experience for me, hearing pieces for the first time, hearing fine musicians from all over the continent (or Europe), sharing the knowledge that collectors...bring to the annual gathering, and savouring the fact that I'm surrounded by a special group of people.<sup>165</sup>

Hutton's comments hint at both the subtly competitive atmosphere at the Society's bash—something that served as a source of motivation—and the rare "learning experience" the bash provided. As I will discuss more in the chapters devoted to the Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival and the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest, outside the context of festivals, many piano ragtime enthusiasts learn to play and practice in relative isolation from other enthusiasts. Thus, for many, performing publicly is a rare and exhilarating experience: a chance to "show off" and earn respect from other knowledgeable enthusiasts.

Throughout the 1960s, the founders of the Ragtime Society occasionally expressed their surprise and delight at the Society's longevity, noting that other attempts to form

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<sup>165</sup> Jack Hutton, "Your humble Editor says...I Wish Scott Joplin Had Been There to Hear John Arpin," *The Ragtimer*, November 1984, n.p.

organizations on the basis of members' shared affinities often lost momentum and disintegrated within a few years of their inception. Even as membership in the Ragtime Society grew and its annual bashes attracted larger and larger audiences, work pressures forced the withdrawal of several key board members, including two of its founders—chairman John Fisher in late 1963, and Jim Kinnear in late 1966<sup>166</sup>—leading to concerns about the Society's future. Seeking to “establish a greater degree of permanence,” the Society's board voted in favor of incorporation effective 30 June 1970. As the first officially-recognized non-profit ragtime organization, *The Ragtimer* proudly announced in January 1971 that “[n]ow we are closer to the true purpose of the SOCIETY...that of ‘preserving’...classical ragtime music.”

Following the Society's incorporation, it continued to function much as it had. Issues of *The Ragtime* continued to include record and book reviews, original feature articles, reprints of newspaper articles, letters submitted by members, news of members' activities, and listings of performers' schedules. Though the Society continued to issue a yearly catalogue through at least 1979 stocking ragtime books, records, and sheet music for the convenience of its members, the increase in commercially-available “classic ragtime” folios and records in the wake of the nationwide “Joplin revival” of the early 1970s meant that there was less demand for the Society to continue its own series of records and sheet music reprints. The Society produced no new records of its own after 1968 and its music reprint program slowed and then stopped, though *The Ragtimer* continued to include a full ragtime sheet music reprint at the end of every issue through

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<sup>166</sup> Cuff, “The Ragtime Society Incorporated,” 13.

the final one in 1986. In lieu of producing recordings, sheet music, and other source material, the Society sought to “preserve” ragtime by fostering live performance and contributing as directly as possible to the sustenance of the community it had built: after 1970, it turned its attention largely to the annual bash and several satellite “mini-bashes” at other times of the year. Issues of *The Ragtimer* devoted more space to discussions of the bashes, including advance notices and detailed reports afterwards.

Despite the influx of younger performers at the Society’s bashes (and presumably in its membership as well) from the mid-to-late 1970s and into the 1980s, *The Ragtimer* became increasingly populated with obituaries, including one for Tom Shea who died suddenly at age 48 of a heart attack in March 1982.<sup>167</sup> Mike Montgomery, a ragtime pianist and collector in Detroit (and Society member), flew to Raleigh, North Carolina for the funeral service (which included several rags) and served as pallbearer. Montgomery wrote a four-page article about the trip for *The Ragtimer* afterwards. Other obituaries in the early 1980s included former Society board members and heads. Meanwhile, rapid turnovers in *Ragtimer* production personnel seemed to indicate that the Society’s end was in sight. 1986 saw a single, labored issue of *The Ragtimer* which proved to be the last. With no formal announcement, the Society quietly dissolved. Other publications like the Maple Leaf Club’s *The Rag Times* and the independent *Mississippi Rag* magazine had long since established themselves among the ragtime community. The return of the Scott Joplin Festival in Sedalia, Missouri in 1983 after several years of dormancy and the rise of the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest and dozens of other smaller

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<sup>167</sup> Mike Montgomery, “Tom Shea,” *The Ragtimer*, March 1982, n.p.

ragtime festivals around the country had siphoned much of the ragtime community's interest previously directed at the Society's annual bash. As Tex Wyndham explains: "the Society simply dissolved as people died off with no replacements."<sup>168</sup> For a time in the 1960s and 1970s, however, the activities of the Ragtime Society prompted California ragtime enthusiast (and Maple Leaf Club co-founder) Bill Mitchell to declare that "Toronto today is as important to ragtime as Sedalia, Missouri, was at the turn of the century."<sup>169</sup>

### 3.5 THE MAPLE LEAF CLUB AND *THE RAG TIMES* (1967-2003)

The longest-running publication to serve the ragtime community was *The Rag Times*, the newsletter of the Maple Leaf Club, an organization based in Los Angeles, California that described itself as "dedicated to the preservation of classic ragtime." A single-sided sheet dated 15 May 1967 announcing the formation of the Maple Leaf Club served as *The Rag Times's* first issue, and with few interruptions, *The Rag Times* continued regular bi-monthly publication until July 2003.<sup>170</sup> Like the *RagTime Review* and the newsletter of the Ragtime Society (*The Ragtimer*) before it, the *Rag Times* printed ragtime record reviews; feature articles that showcased original research on ragtime topics; news and reviews of ragtime festivals, concerts, and other activities; profiles of ragtime composers, publishers,

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<sup>168</sup> Tex Wyndham, interview with the author, 25 October 2015.

<sup>169</sup> Bill Mitchell, "Introducing: The Ragtime Society," *The Rag Times*, July 1967, 6.

<sup>170</sup> *The Rag Times's* only notable hiatus occurred from November 2000 to November 2002 when it temporarily ceased publication while its editor, Dick Zimmerman, relocated from California to Illinois.



and performers; reprints of newspaper and magazine articles (old and new) of interest to ragtime enthusiasts; and letters from readers.

The Maple Leaf Club, which took its name from Scott Joplin's famous rag, grew out of the chance meeting of several ragtime enthusiasts in the Los Angeles area and their subsequent informal get-togethers.<sup>171</sup> David Bourne, one of the club's founders, recalls the origins of the Maple Leaf Club:

In the middle 60's, I began to work at the Magic Castle and also Shakey's Pizza on Sunset Blvd. in Hollywood, California. I will always remember Dick Zimmerman approaching me at Shakey's and asking if I played any "classic ragtime." I said, "Sure, *12<sup>th</sup> St. Rag* and *Tiger Rag*." Dick gently explained to me about "classic ragtime" and proceeded to demonstrate the same in his own amazing, inimitable style. As time progressed, my interest in ragtime blossomed through Dick's inspiration... Dick had met two gentlemen who worked as paste-up artists/printers at the Los Angeles TIMES, namely Chuck McClure and Albert Huerta, the latter known variously as "Piano Roll" Albert or Albert Grimaldi. Both Chuck and Albert had a keen interest in ragtime, mainly through Albert's extensive piano roll collection. (It was Albert who discovered [Scott Joplin's] *Silver Swan*.) They wanted to form some sort of club and even had gone so far as to suggest a name, and already had membership cards designed. Many piano roll "sessions" were held at Albert's house but as the months went by, no club was ever formed. At this point, I decided to contact people who I knew had an interest in ragtime and might want to put something like this together. I sent a letter to Chuck McClure, Albert Huerta, Dick Zimmerman, Bob Bradford and Bill Mitchell. I knew Bill Mitchell from the Southern California Hot Jazz Society and Bradford had been a customer at Shakey's and had a long association with ragtime.<sup>172</sup>

The beginning of Bourne's letter to McClure, Huerta, et al. (dated 7 April 1967) read:

It has come to my attention that there are a number of people besides ourselves who have an interest in "classical ragtime" and that the time has

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<sup>171</sup> Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" was, in turn, likely named after Sedalia, Missouri's Maple Leaf Club, though testimony from long-time Sedalia resident Tom Ireland suggests that Maple Leaf Club may have also been named for Joplin's rag. See Edward A. Berlin, *King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 59-62.

<sup>172</sup> David Bourne, "Some thoughts on the founding of the Maple Leaf Club," *The Rag Times*, March 1992, 2-3.

come to pool our interests with the hope of preserving and promoting “classical ragtime” and other worthy pianistic material from the period prior to about 1930.<sup>173</sup>

Bourne’s comments make no mention of any other ragtime publication or organization, but a column by Dick Zimmerman in *The Rag Times’s* second issue (July 1967) reveals that he and the other Maple Leaf Club founders were already well aware of the Ragtime Society (of Canada) and its publication, *The Ragtimer*. In referencing the Ragtime Society, Zimmerman reminds *The Rag Times’s* own readers that the two share the same primary objective: “the Preservation of Classic Ragtime.”<sup>174</sup> However, while the Ragtime Society appealed to a geographically diverse readership and focused its efforts largely on society “activities” that could be conducted by mail (such as its newsletter and the distribution of ragtime source materials including Society-produced reprints and records), the Maple Leaf Club catered primarily to local ragtime enthusiasts in Southern California, its primary effort being the organization of bi-monthly meetings. The third issue of *The Rag Times* summarized the goals of the Maple Leaf Club:

The Maple Leaf Club is composed of individuals of every age, profession, and background whose common interest is Ragtime—whether it be playing, listening, or collecting rolls, records, or sheet music. The Club’s stated goal, “Dedicated to the preservation of classic ragtime,” does not mean that “non-classic” ragtime or other worthwhile music from the ragtime era is not performed at meetings, but the emphasis is on “classic” ragtime.

The MLC hopes to achieve its goal by:

1. Providing facilities at its bi-monthly meetings for performing and listening to ragtime, both live and on piano rolls.
2. Bringing together those interested in ragtime for purposes of collecting, trading, or playing the music.

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<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>174</sup> Dick Zimmerman, “The Maple Leaf Club—It’s [sic] Past and Future,” *The Rag Times*, July 1967.

3. Encouraging new ragtime performers and assisting them in getting hard-to-find sheet music.
4. Providing members with a source of ragtime information, both current and historical, through its publication, The Rag Times.

Membership is open to everyone and includes a one-year subscription to The Rag Times, the beautiful MLC membership card (which has already become a collector's item), and special chances to win valuable prizes at meetings. Send \$2.00 to The Maple Leaf Club, 8720 El Manor Avenue, Los Angeles, California, 90045.<sup>175</sup>

While the Maple Leaf Club sought to appeal to ragtime players, listeners, and collectors alike, more than either *The RagTime Review* or the Ragtime Society, the Maple Leaf Club and its newsletter cultivated a participatory atmosphere that strongly encouraged ragtime *performance*. From the Club's inception, bi-monthly meetings were its chief *raison d'être*, fulfilling three of the Club's four stated goals. Meeting notices frequently appeared on *The Rag Times's* front page, and most issues of the newsletter devoted considerable space to a detailed report and photographs of the Maple Leaf Club's most recent meeting, including a list of performers and selections played. Meetings frequently took place in nostalgia-themed restaurants in the Los Angeles area, including The Gaslight Club (2105 Artesia Blvd., Redondo Beach), Mickie Finn's (157 N. La Cienega Blvd., Beverly Hills), The Red Garter (1600 N. Argyle, Hollywood), The Fire Station (12625 Harbor Blvd., Garden Grove), Shakey's Pizza Parlor (7001 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood), The Northwoods Inn (7257 N. Rosemead Blvd., San Gabriel), and Pizza Palace (Brookhurst and Adams, Huntington Beach) among others.<sup>176</sup> Dick Zimmerman was the usual master of ceremonies, introducing as many as a dozen or more performers

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<sup>175</sup> "Maple Leaf Club Goals," *The Rag Times*, September 1967, 7.

<sup>176</sup> This listing of meeting locations was gleaned from issues of *The Rag Times* as well as my interview with Robert Bradford, 21 October 2015.

at each meeting. Most of the performers were amateurs of varying ability drawn from the Maple Leaf Club's members, though occasionally club meetings featured notable guest performers who happened to be in the area.<sup>177</sup> In the Club's first five years, it welcomed such ragtime luminaries as Ian Whitcomb, Eubie Blake, Shelton Brooks, Johnny Maddox, and Max Morath to its meetings. Piano roll collectors were encouraged to bring rolls from their collections to be played, and musicians who were not pianists often brought their instruments along for informal "jam sessions." Whether at the behest of Zimmerman or out of respect for the Club's stated emphasis on "classic ragtime," instrumental piano rags of the 1890s-1910 dominated the repertoire at Maple Leaf Club meetings during the club's first decade. Robert Bradford recalls that to many attendees at Club meetings in the late 1960s, "the old rags were still fresh. We hadn't heard most of them before."<sup>178</sup> Each meeting started with a member playing Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag," followed by piano solos, duets, and ensembles. While works by ragtime's "Big Three" (Joplin, Lamb, and Scott) featured prominently at Club meetings, so did obscure rags by little-known composers of the ragtime era. Performers also frequently took the opportunity to play their own ragtime compositions before an appreciative crowd. Less prominent (though hardly absent) were early jazz, stride, and novelty pieces of the 1910s, '20s, and '30s.

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<sup>177</sup> Maple Leaf Club members who performed regularly at the club's bimonthly meetings include Dick Zimmerman, Dave Bourne, Kathi Backus, Kären Rankin, Jim Hession, Bill Mitchell, Rod Miller, Robbie Rhodes, Walter Colvin, and Bob Bradford.

<sup>178</sup> Robert Bradford, interview with the author, 21 October 2015.

# The Rag Times

America's Only Ragtime Organization

July, Aug., 1969

Volume III, No. 2

## GASLIGHT FOR NEXT EXTRAVAGANZA

The Maple Leaf Club, once again will return to the Gaslight in Redondo Beach, Calif. on July 27th.

For those of you who have never been to any of our Gaslight meetings, they are located at 2105 Artesia Blvd. in Redondo Beach. To reach their Gay 90's establishment, traveling South on the San Diego Freeway, you turn right on Inglewood Ave. offramp (south) and continue south on Inglewood to Artesia Blvd. (deadend). Turn right on Artesia to 2105.

The piano-pumping and swap-meeting part of the afternoon program will start at 12:30 p.m., with rolls also being pumped during intermissions throughout the day.

The regular program starts promptly at 1:30 p.m. See you then.

### Gaslight Turns On to Ragtime, New Members, and Special Guest

By Carlo Lu Lu III

On May 25, 1969, the Gaslight Club in Redondo Beach again saw the meeting of the Maple Leaf Club and the euphonious strains of ragtime could be heard for blocks around. Our leader, Dick Zimmerman, who usually runs the meetings as easily as he runs off his card tricks was not with us. Therefore, an air mail message was sent via one-way carrier archaeopteryx to Col. Robert Allen Bradford, who was out on a possum hunt, to take over the ceremonies.

Col. Bradford, out of uniform due to the heat (temp), opened the meeting with the traditional **Maple Leaf Rag**. The lightening fast fingers of Rod Miller then assured everyone that the meeting was under way with his presto renditions of **Grandfather's Clock** and **Happy Days are Here Again**. Our only local recorded member of the Maple Leaf Club, Bill Mitchell, played a rarely heard complex James Scott tune, **Ragtime Betty**, and then followed it with **Hot Hands** by Charley Straight. (Straight used to record piano rolls for QRS). Walter Colvin played a long-established favorite by Henry Lodge, **Temptation Rag**, then followed with **12th Street Rag**. (Lodge slipped into obscurity years ago and nothing was ever heard about him since). Doug Parker of Gaslight renown played an original composition, which he named **South Bay Syn-copes**, as a banjo solo. Tom Foley started off with **Chop Sticks** and converted it into ragtime style, following with **Ragtime Cowboy Joe** and an 1895 waltz, **After the Ball**.



Jim Hession on piano with his wife Martha, ukelele and Art Levin on tuba.

Doc Nixon, who was rather hesitant about his performing ability, surprised the whole assembly as being one of the best performers of the day. His own style on **Ole Tom Cat on the Keys** and **Hor D'Ouvres** was a definite delight that I could have listened to for hours. The Gaslight Banjo Band finished the first set with a number of tunes, including **At a Georgia Campmeeting** with Karen Rankin on caliope, **Darktown Strutter's Ball**, and **Tiger Rag** with our aviator-host Don Fulmer on trombone.

After a short intermission the meeting resumed and was quickly called to attention by Jim Hession who delighted the audience with **Black Bottom Stomp** and one of his own originals, **Proficiency Rag**. Kathy Backus, from Santa Barbara, did one of the later Joe Lamb tunes, **Alabama Rag** and then for contrast played the primitive **Buffalo Rag** by Tom Turpin. A trio, consisting of Dave Bourne

(formerly of Hock Shop fame), Doug O'Brien, and Art Levin, respectively on piano, banjo, and tuba brought back an old Percy Wenrich tune, **Put on Your Old Grey Bonnet**, then **Those Were the Days**, and the old King Oliver favorite, **Doctor Jazz**. Darryl Dugan broke his long absence from the club with his own style of **Chop Sticks** and a vocal of **Oceana Roll**. Ethel Hiatt brought back an old Jelly Roll Morton tune, **Sweet Substitute**. Frank Kirby, who will be playing in Colorado this summer at the request of Max Morath, gave the piano a workout with **Deed I Do** and **Down Yonder**. The Gaslight Banjo Band closed the second set with **Ida, Caliope Rag** (Karen on Caliope), **Toot, Toot, Tootsie** and **12th Street Rag**.

Opening the third set, Dave, Doug, and Art turned on the audience to **Back Home in Indiana**, **When the Was Breaks Out in Mexico**

Continued on Page 2, Col. 1

Figure 3.7 The Rag Times

The decision to hold club meetings in “Gay ‘90s”-themed restaurants, coupled with photographs showing performers and other attendees in costumes meant to evoke the ragtime era suggests that many in the Maple Leaf Club associated ragtime very strongly with a specific historical period. While contemporaneous photographs of Ragtime Society bashes in Toronto show performers and attendees in more modern formal attire—suits, ties, dresses, etc.—their counterparts at the Maple Leaf Club meetings are shown in vests, bowler hats, and arm garters, the photographs sometimes whimsically re-touched before printing to add handlebar mustaches and other flourishes. “The arm garters were the stereotype because Bob Darch did it,” recalled Robert Bradford, “We had a lady there...she was a nurse, and she made arm garters for the musicians...and she also made us sweatshirts with the names of a whole bunch of musicians and composers on there. Some people would really try to overdo it. There’s a picture of me [at a Club meeting] in a Confederate uniform. I was directing a Civil War play at the time... and I wore the coat to a meeting. I thought it looked pretty spiffy.”<sup>179</sup>

Because *The Rag Times* counted among its small production team two newspaper design and layout professionals (Chuck McClure and Albert Huerta), from its inception, the newsletter adopted a graphics-rich format that mimicked a real newspaper. From a masthead logo that was remarkably similar to that of the *Los Angeles Times*, to copious photographs and illustrations, to multiple columns per page with bold headlines in a variety of fonts—many of them decorative “antique” fonts meant to evoke those associated with broadsides, promotional posters, and periodicals of the late nineteenth and early

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<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

twentieth centuries—*The Rag Times's* striking, professional appearance distinguished it from the minimally-illustrated, plainly-typed, “no frills” appearance of both the *RagTime Review* and *The Ragtimer*.

Despite the professional appearance of *The Rag Times*, the Maple Leaf Club itself remained an informal, loosely organized operation throughout its thirty-three years.<sup>180</sup> “The purpose of the [Maple Leaf Club]... would simply be to get together, and play, and hear, and talk ragtime. A roster of elected officers and formal business meetings are not needed to do this. All it takes are a very few people who can do the coordinating with ears tuned to the preferences of the members,” wrote Dick Zimmerman shortly after the Club’s first meeting in 1967.<sup>181</sup> The Club had no board or elected officials, though issues of *The Rag Times* did credit a volunteer treasurer and secretary.<sup>182</sup> While some members seemed to appreciate the perceived lack of “politics, boards, elections, animosity, grief, friction, [and] power struggles,”<sup>183</sup> the Club’s casual nature precluded it from organizing any festivals or other major events of its own beyond the bi-monthly meetings. For most of the Maple Leaf Club’s existence, Zimmerman acted as *de facto* leader.<sup>184</sup> “The guy’s got so much energy,” said Club co-founder Robert Bradford, “I mean, he was always on the go, and he knew what he was doing, and he knew how to do it. Dave Bourne and I thought, God, well this is a great guy to run the club. We just let Dick have it...He did a wonderful

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<sup>180</sup> Although *The Rag Times* continued to bill itself as a production of the Maple Leaf Club through its final issue in July 2003, the last meeting of the Club appears to have taken place on 30 May 1999 in Pasadena, California. Whatever remained of the Club at that time seems to have dissolved when Dick Zimmerman moved to Illinois in the summer of 2000, though he and partner Tracy Doyle continued to produce *The Rag Times*.

<sup>181</sup> “The Maple Leaf Club—It’s [sic] Past and Future,” 2.

<sup>182</sup> Beginning in the March 1974 issue of *The Rag Times* and continuing until the September 1994 issue, *The Rag Times* identified Anna Marie Zimmerman (Dick Zimmerman’s mother) as secretary.

<sup>183</sup> “The Saga of ‘Piano Roll Albert,’” *The Rag Times*, March 2000, 4.

<sup>184</sup> Robert Bradford, interview with the author, 21 October 2015.

job. We didn't need to elect anybody."<sup>185</sup> He served as regular master of ceremonies at club meetings, edited *The Rag Times* (and authored many of its articles), and organized many of the formal concerts and "extravaganzas" produced in the Club's name.<sup>186</sup> Unlike the Ragtime Society, which actively produced a number of LPs and professional sheet music reprints in addition to sponsoring an annual "Bash" that attracted dozens of performers from outside the Toronto area, the Maple Leaf Club appears to have produced no recordings or publications other than *The Rag Times* and a small number of individual sheet music titles early in its existence (including reprints of old rags and first editions of new rags, including some by Ian Whitcomb, often pseudonymously).<sup>187</sup>

Like the *RagTime Review* and *The Ragtimer*, the *Rag Times* offered a forum for readers to interact, exchanging information and sharing everything from audiotapes to car rides. While *The Rag Times* never published a detailed subscriber directory as the *RagTime Review* had, it occasionally published the names, addresses, and collecting interests of ragtime enthusiasts seeking to trade tapes of ragtime recordings; the most sought-after tapes seem to have been those of concert or private recordings unobtainable commercially. Because *The Rag Times* was associated with the Los Angeles-based Maple Leaf Club and connected a number of local ragtime enthusiasts (in addition to those who subscribed from afar), in advance of festivals, readers often submitted classified-style

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<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> Because I was unable to interview Zimmerman personally about his role in the Maple Leaf Club, I have been informed primarily by issues of *The Rag Times* themselves (I have surveyed the entire run) and anecdotal remarks from others in the ragtime community whom I have interviewed.

<sup>187</sup> Two of the Maple Leaf Club's most widely-promoted sheet music publications in *The Rag Times* included a facsimile reprint of the first edition of Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" (in 1970) and a ragtime composition by revivalist-era composer Ian Whitcomb, "Sandcastle—A Day by the Sea" (in 1969) issued under the pseudonym "F. Arthur Nouveau." (Whitcomb told me in a 25 July 2014 interview that the pseudonym was used because, following his then-recent success as a rock 'n' roll singer, he figured ragtime aficionados would not take his composition seriously if they knew he had written it.)



notices seeking or offering carpool opportunities. “Ride needed to and from the Sedalia Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival. Will share driving and expenses,” wrote one hopeful festival-goer in May 1974.<sup>188</sup>

*The Rag Times* frequently sought to engage its readers in collective action—often by encouraging letter-writing campaigns—both for the evangelical task of promoting ragtime among the general public and the defensive task of correcting mistakes when it felt that “classic” ragtime was being misrepresented publicly. In the May 1969 edition, a short mention of a recently-released U. S. postage stamp honoring blues composer W. C. Handy ended with the parenthetical aside “We wonder how long it will be before there is a Scott Joplin postage stamp.”<sup>189</sup> Subsequent issues in the following years expressed more directly the hope for a Joplin stamp and encouraged readers to write the Post Office. During the “Joplin boom” of the early 1970s, with publishers, producers, and other opportunists eager to exploit the music commercially, *The Rag Times* found many targets against which to rally its readers. When Warner Bros. published a folio titled *Rag Time — 37 Renowned Rags for the Piano* in 1973 to capitalize on growing national interest in ragtime, *The Rag Times* expressed dismay that the collection, in fact, contained primarily “honky-tonk arrangements of old pop songs, but very little ragtime.”<sup>190</sup> Besides gently discouraging readers from buying the folio themselves, *The Rag Times* suggested that anyone disapproving of Warner Bros.’s folio should write to Warner Bros. directly to express displeasure and request that the company publish more “legitimate” ragtime from its catalogue in the future. It can be difficult to gauge the success of such letter-writing

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<sup>188</sup> “Bric-a-Brac,” *The Rag Times*, May 1974, 11.

<sup>189</sup> “A ‘Handy’ Stamp,” *The Rag Times*, May 1969, 9.

<sup>190</sup> “Warner Bros. Confused?” *The Rag Times*, September 1973, 7.

campaigns since readers acted individually, and publishers, producers, or other commercial actors seldom acknowledged publicly the effects of such letter-writing campaigns. Whether they were successful or not, such efforts helped to unite *The Rag Times's* readers in a sense of common purpose.

Like *The RagTime Review* and *The Ragtimer*, one of the Maple Leaf Club's goals was to facilitate the distribution of source materials to members and enthusiasts.<sup>191</sup> Because the *Review* and *Ragtimer* had already initiated regular series of sheet music reprints, and because by the late 1960s, folios such as Max Morath's *100 Ragtime Classics* had mitigated somewhat the paucity of source material that had paradoxically hampered and encouraged early revivalists, the Maple Leaf Club took a different approach. Rather than select and reproduce out-of-print rags *en masse*, with the July 1970 edition, *The Rag Times* announced a custom copy service. Drawing on its founders' extensive collections of original and photocopied sheet music, *The Rag Times* offered made-to-order copies of public domain music unobtainable elsewhere at a price of 75¢ each.<sup>192</sup> (By 1999, the price had risen to \$5 each.<sup>193</sup>) Long lists of available rags alphabetized by title were published in installments to help readers identify desired rags and place orders. While *The RagTime Review* and *The Ragtimer* had made limited selections—chosen by committee or popular vote—widely available, *The Rag Times* made for the first time a wide selection available on a somewhat limited basis.

One of the Maple Leaf Club's most important and lasting contributions to the ragtime community was the discovery, authentication, and publication of Scott Joplin's rag

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<sup>191</sup> "Maple Leaf Club Goals," 7.

<sup>192</sup> Dick Zimmerman, "The Rag Bag," *The Rag Times*, July 1970, 8.

<sup>193</sup> "Custom Music Copying!" advertisement in *The Rag Times*, July 1999, 10.

“The Silver Swan” in 1970—the only posthumous discovery of a “new” complete Joplin work. Never published in sheet music form during Joplin’s lifetime, “The Silver Swan” had been released only on a QRS piano roll in 1914. Though some keen-eyed ragtime enthusiasts had spotted the rag listed in QRS catalogues of the 1910s,<sup>194</sup> no copy of the roll was known to exist until Maple Leaf Club co-founder Albert Huerta came across a copy of the roll while sorting his collection.<sup>195</sup> At the time Huerta bought the roll in the mid-1950s, “he knew nothing about classic ragtime, so the Joplin name meant nothing to him.”<sup>196</sup> At early Maple Leaf Club meetings, Huerta had occasionally joked about a “Dying Swan Rag” roll buried among unsorted rolls in his collection, but he did not recall the composer.<sup>197</sup> Upon finding the roll in early 1970 and taking note of Joplin’s name this time, Huerta promptly alerted Dick Zimmerman and others in the Maple Leaf Club. Word of the discovery spread through *The Rag Times*,<sup>198</sup> but even before the roll’s authenticity could be questioned or debated, another copy surfaced in St. Louis, owned by nickelodeon collector Donald McDonald who had acquired it months earlier when buying a Cremona automatic piano.<sup>199</sup> Tape copies were made and circulated for authentication among ragtime authorities and collectors including “Knocky” Parker, Michael Montgomery, Harold Doerr, David Bourne, Kathi Backus, and Trebor Tichenor—

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<sup>194</sup> Dick Zimmerman, “Saga of the Silver Swan,” *The Rag Times*, July 1970, 1.

<sup>195</sup> “Rare Rag Roll Found,” *The Rag Times*, May 1970, 1.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> Curiously, the Ragtime Society’s *Ragtimer* made no mention of “The Silver Swan” until July 1971, when a mention of the New York Public Library’s recent *Collected Works of Scott Joplin* folio noted the inclusion of “‘Silver Swan Rag,’ recently discovered in Los Angeles on a piano roll.” The Society may have felt that enough of its members were also *Rag Times* readers, rendering a repeat announcement of the discovery redundant.

<sup>199</sup> Zimmerman, “Saga of the Silver Swan,” 1.

most (or all) of them Maple Leaf Club members.<sup>200</sup> Upon listening, nearly all of them were “quite certain” that it was a Joplin composition.<sup>201</sup> Dick Zimmerman and Donna McCluer transcribed the rag from the piano roll, and with further editing by Vera Brodsky Lawrence and William Bolcom, it was first published in the New York Public Library’s *Collected Works of Scott Joplin* in 1971.<sup>202</sup> The Maple Leaf Club subsequently made its own edition available to members in 1972.<sup>203</sup>

As the Maple Leaf Club attracted more members from outside the Los Angeles area, at least one effort was made to establish a “satellite” Maple Leaf Club. The front page of the January 1971 *Rag Times* welcomed a chapter in Portland, Oregon, formed by Helen Cole. Like the parent club in Los Angeles, the Portland Maple Leaf Club established a schedule of regular meetings and sent photographs and descriptions of them to *The Rag Times* for publication. Though smaller in scope (the meetings were held in private homes with at most two dozen attendees),<sup>204</sup> the initial success of the Oregon chapter encouraged the Los Angeles Maple Leaf Club to suggest the formation of additional satellite clubs: “It seems like Treb [Trebor Tichenor] and the boys back St. Louis way could eventually start another chapter. Who knows where it could lead?”<sup>205</sup> Despite the initial optimism, there is no evidence that any additional satellite clubs were formed, and the Oregon chapter seems to have been short-lived; it quietly disappears from the pages of *The Rag Times* after only a few months.

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<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>202</sup> “Silver Swan Available in May,” *The Rag Times*, March 1972.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>204</sup> “Oregon Chapter News,” *The Rag Times*, March 1971, 1.

<sup>205</sup> “Welcome Oregon Chapter,” *The Rag Times*, January 1971.

With no formal charter, elected board, or other formalities, it is remarkable that the Maple Leaf Club survived as long as it did. The last notice for a Maple Leaf Club meeting appeared in the March 1999 edition of *The Rag Times*, announcing a meeting May 30 at a Pasadena IHOP Restaurant.<sup>206</sup> A year later, Maple Leaf Club co-founder, *Rag Times* editor, and generally acknowledged leader Dick Zimmerman moved from California to Illinois.<sup>207</sup> He and partner Tracy Doyle continued to publish *The Rag Times* as a production of the Maple Leaf Club through July 2003 when publication abruptly ceased without notice, effectively drawing to a close the longest-running ragtime revival publication and the club that produced it.

### 3.6 SUMMARY

Of the 1950s, Martin Halliwell writes that “[o]ne of the strongest themes of the decade was that of authenticity, the difficulty of preserving genuine experience in the face of commercial and ideological pressures.”<sup>208</sup> While the “honky-tonk” ragtime movement that began in the early 1950s continued to enjoy widespread popularity and commercial success into the 1960s, many who traced their interest in ragtime to the traditional jazz revival of the 1940s or to *They All Played Ragtime* saw in it a gross caricature of the music they held in esteem. In their efforts to preserve “classic ragtime,” a number of enthusiasts

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<sup>206</sup> “Next Meet May 30,” *The Rag Times*, March 1999, 1.

<sup>207</sup> Zimmerman’s address in *The Rag Times* changes from Grass Valley, CA (July 2000 issue) to Loves Park, IL (September 2000 issue).

<sup>208</sup> Martin Halliwell, *American Culture in the 1950s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 10.

across the United States and Canada in the 1960s organized themselves—through local clubs and the pages of far-reaching publications—from a loosely connected collective into a functional community. While early publications such as *The RagTime Review* and the newsletter of The Ragtime Society prioritized the distribution of source materials through ambitious sheet music re-print programs and the production of LP records, by the mid-1960s, their efforts (along with those of the Maple Leaf Club) turned ever more to the organization of get-togethers, bashes, and festivals that sought to unite parent tradition “informants” with younger revivalists and bring the scattered ragtime community together physically. These early festivals and get-togethers helped to establish the models for bigger and more lasting festivals in the 1970s such as the Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival and the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest, annual events that have continued to serve and shape the ragtime community into the twenty-first century.

#### 4.0 THE SCOTT JOPLIN INTERNATIONAL RAGTIME FESTIVAL

Since the mid-1960s, festivals have played an important role in building, shaping, and maintaining the ragtime community. While the newsletters, societies, and clubs that emerged in the 1960s enabled ragtime enthusiasts to more easily and effectively communicate with each other across great distances to exchange sheet music, research, and opinions, most still lacked the intimacy of face-to-face contact. For a music so driven by individual style and interpretation, newsletters made for cumbersome and often ineffective discussion and demonstration of ragtime's more performance-oriented facets. At festivals, the ragtime community comes together in physical form, providing a focused environment in which community members reaffirm their commitment to the music and each other. By enabling performers, audiences, scholars, and other enthusiasts to build meaningful inter-personal connections through shared performance and experience, festivals foster friendships and musical partnerships that often extend well beyond the time and physical space of the festival. Festivals also confer on their featured performers a degree of legitimacy within an established "tradition" (the festival tradition); such legitimacy often translates into a sense of "authenticity" that may extend to those performers' styles, compositions, and repertoire. Following the disintegration of the Ragtime Society in 1986 and the Maple Leaf Club in 2003, in the absence of any authoritative national ragtime society, festivals have emerged as driving forces in the

revival: social as well as musical arenas that help to establish the parameters that define the ragtime community musically, socially, and otherwise.

Since 2003, I have attended more than thirty ragtime festivals—often as a performer, but occasionally as a non-performing observer—and collectively, they have accounted for some of the most profoundly transformative experiences of my own life. At the festivals themselves, the ability to see, hear, and assess other performers in person, and the opportunity to cultivate mutual trust and goodwill with other performers and audiences alike has led to a number of artistic collaborative projects ranging from composition commissions to joint concerts to appearances at *other* festivals to recording projects. As of October 2015, twenty-five of the thirty-two “contemporary” CD releases I have produced on my Rivermont label can be traced to project ideas or partnerships forged at ragtime festivals. (I could also point out that the audiences at festivals have also accounted for a substantial part of the market for those CDs as well.) Because of friendships made at ragtime festivals, from my home in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I have traveled as far as Idaho for a birthday party, New York City for a wedding, Florida for a recording session, Texas to judge a contest, and twice to Argentina for performances—reuniting with ragtime friends in the far-flung places they live after first meeting at festivals.

Like the individual performers and audience members they attract, each festival is unique. Even if nearly all festivals in the United States draw regularly from the same pool of several dozen active performers, and even if many attract a contingent of “core community” festival-goers in their audiences, festivals operate according to different schedules, organizational models, and core values (musical or otherwise), giving each a



unique identity. Some operate annually, others more irregularly. Some attract crowds of hundreds or even thousands, others only a few dozen. Larger festivals typically operate multiple indoor or outdoor performance venues simultaneously according to strict schedules, while smaller festivals tend to feature more loosely-organized “open piano” sessions; still others present only a single series of formally structured concerts. Some hold concerts in large historic theaters, others in modest churches, and still others outdoors or in private homes. Some festivals are run by ragtime clubs, societies, or non-profit foundations; others under the auspices of colleges or universities; and others by private individuals. Some are funded by state or federal arts grants, others solely by ticket sales and donations. A few construct elaborate stage sets that evoke “ragtime era” settings and encourage performers and audiences alike to dress in theatrical or “period” costume, but most appear to prefer a presentation modeled on art music concert norms in the twenty-first century. Nearly all are pianocentric, but while some feature pianists exclusively, others welcome more instrumental variety, and some create special performance opportunities for singers. Some are held in major urban centers, others take pride in offering attendees a rural escape; many of the former go to great effort to attract “general audiences,” while many of the latter cater to smaller groups of ragtime “insiders.” Most festivals encourage interaction between performers and audience members both on- and off-stage, further engendering a sense of camaraderie, even as a few would seem to restrict such interactions, either for the comfort and well-being of the performers, or to project a more formal atmosphere. Some festivals are fairly restrictive in the repertoire performers are permitted to play—performers may be instructed to avoid stride or selections

composed after 1929. Others seek to foster a more inclusive musical environment, where a Joplin “classic” rag might be followed by a jazz or boogie-woogie arrangement of a song from Walt Disney’s *Aladdin*. In short, any attempt to summarize or describe “the typical ragtime festival” would be futile because each exudes its own distinct character and each operates according to its organizer’s (or organizers’) aesthetic code to cast ragtime in a subtly different light.

A detailed comparison of the various ragtime festivals is outside the scope of this study. Instead, I will devote this chapter and the next to a discussion and comparison of the two festivals which have been central not only to my own experience and understanding of the ragtime revival community, but that have—by their geographic location, longevity, size, and influence—become arguably the two most important festivals of the ragtime revival movement. Both emerged at the peak of the nationwide Scott Joplin “boom” in the middle 1970s but with entirely different motivations and operating procedures: one is a contest-oriented festival, the other is not. Though the two are operated independently with entirely separate parent organizations, they attract many of the same performers and attendees, and their geographic and temporal proximity in each year’s summer “festival season” means that they often function as complements to each other—the two acts of a kind of “meta-festival.” In this chapter, I will discuss the annual Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival; in the next, I will turn my attention to the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest.

#### 4.1 SEDALIA, MISSOURI: “THE CRADLE OF RAGTIME”

*You haven't experienced ragtime until you have been to Sedalia.*

DICK ZIMMERMAN<sup>1</sup>

Most music revivals trace themselves back to an idealized homeland: a specific time and place where a particular music thrived<sup>2</sup> (or, as Burt Feintuch has noted, a time and place where a music tradition is *thought* to have thrived.)<sup>3</sup> Chris Ware has noted that “Sedalia [Missouri] has acquired an almost mythological status in the history of ragtime.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, since the beginnings of the ragtime revival in the 1940s, revivalists have widely acknowledged Sedalia as the music’s homeland. In a literal sense, it had been home to several of the revival movement’s most celebrated figures; in an ideological sense, it was “home” to many revivalists’ romantic notions of the turn-of-the-century Midwestern American “frontier” town—not unlike *Gunsmoke’s* Dodge City. As a bustling railroad town in the 1890s<sup>5</sup>—a regional center of commerce and transportation—Sedalia was a destination for cattle drives and home to a lively entertainment district with plenty of brothels and saloons that supported a number of ragtime pianists and aspiring composers.

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<sup>1</sup> Dick Zimmerman, “Sedalia Fest,” *The Rag Times*, September 1975, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Tamara Livingston, “Music Revivals: Towards a General Theory,” *Ethnomusicology* Vol. 43, No. 1 (1999): 73.

<sup>3</sup> Burt Feintuch, “Musical Revival as Musical Transformation,” in *Transforming Tradition*, ed. Neil V. Rosenberg. (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 185.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Ware, “Sedalia Goings-On,” *The Rag-Time Ephemeralist* 3, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Sedalia was founded in 1860 as a railroad town, its early economy fueled by the Tebo & Neosho Railroad Company, and later the Missouri, Kansas & Texas (MK&T) line. Beginning in the 1870s, it served an important role linking rail travel from Kansas City and other points west to St. Louis and cities in the east. For the next sixty years, Sedalia grew and prospered alongside the railroad. Although passenger rail service to Sedalia ended in 1958 following years of declining demand, freight trains still pass through regularly, and the town has remained proud of its railroad history. See the City of Sedalia website: <http://www.cityofsedalia.com/content/190/68/default.aspx> (Accessed 2 May 2011).

(Lifelong Sedalia resident Beatrice Martin recalled in a 1975 interview that it had been known as the “musical town of the West.”<sup>6</sup>) Early revivalists like Brun Campbell, Rudi Blesh, and Harriet Janis devoted considerable effort to discussing its historical importance as a hotbed of ragtime activity for a few fleeting years at the last turn of the century.<sup>7</sup> Scott Joplin lived and worked in Sedalia from 1894 to 1901, and it was there that he studied at the George R. Smith College and published his first real success, the “Maple Leaf Rag,” with Sedalia music publisher John Stark.<sup>8</sup> It was also in Sedalia that Joplin befriended, taught, and collaborated with two other notable ragtime composers, Arthur Marshall and Scott Hayden.

If ragtime in its early years is often widely understood among ragtime enthusiasts and the general public alike to have been a folk music cultivated primarily among African-American musicians and then appropriated, popularized, and exploited by white performers and publishers against the backdrop of Jim Crow segregation and gross racial inequality, to many in the ragtime community, the story of Joplin and Stark in Sedalia provides a powerful allegory that speaks to the music’s ability to transcend differences of race, class, and age in a spirit of mutual cooperation and benefit. Although African-Americans in Sedalia in the 1890s faced many of the same discriminatory policies and abuses as African-Americans in other segregated cities, race relations in Sedalia were relatively good—a vestige, perhaps, of its founder’s “considerable concern and charity for

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<sup>6</sup> Edward A. Berlin, *King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 13.

<sup>7</sup> S. Brunson Campbell and R. J. Carew, “Sedalia...Missouri, Cradle of Ragtime,” *The Record Changer*, May 1945, 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 24, 25, 98.

the freed slaves” in the 1860s.<sup>9</sup> Edward A. Berlin reports that white Sedalians were generally fair in their dealings with black Sedalians, a claim that would seem to be borne out by the contractual conditions under which Stark (who was white) published “Maple Leaf Rag,” which included the payment to Joplin (who was African-American) of a one-cent royalty for every copy sold.<sup>10</sup> At its worst, ragtime and popular music of the 1890s and early 1900s could be wildly offensive in its treatment of African-Americans and other minorities, not only in titles, song lyrics, and cover illustrations, but in exploitative business dealings that often found white publishers taking advantage of African-American composers. At its best, ragtime afforded opportunities—sometimes quite lucrative—and respect to African-American composers and performers that they might not have had elsewhere. Joplin’s relatively long and fruitful partnership with Stark, forged in “tolerant” Sedalia, has long served among ragtime revivalists as an example of the latter.<sup>11</sup> The Joplin-Stark partnership also represents the happy union of forces often diametrically opposed in popular music: artistic “genius” and business acumen. If Joplin was to become the “King” of ragtime writers, Stark would be the “King” of ragtime publishers. Despite differences of race and age,<sup>12</sup> the two succeeded with each other’s help. Joplin and Stark would eventually part ways in New York City, but their professional beginnings in Sedalia

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Berlin notes that it was common for white publishers to offer black composers a one-time payment—usually of from \$25 to \$50—for their works, of which they then became copyright owners with no further royalties due the composer. Stark’s arrangement with Joplin, while not unique, was unusual, and it generated a modest income for Joplin for the rest of his life. See Berlin, 56.

<sup>11</sup> In a 1959 interview with Trebor Tichenor, Arthur Marshall recalled that John Stark “was very fair” with composers—black and white. See Trebor Tichenor, “Missouri Ragtime Revival,” *The Rag Times*, January 1971, 3.

<sup>12</sup> In 1899, at 58, John Stark was nearly twice Joplin’s age. (Blesh and Janis, in *They All Played Ragtime*, report that Stark was born 11 April 1841; they report Joplin’s birthdate as 24 November 1868.) Although he had long been involved in selling musical instruments, he was new to music publishing at the time he agreed to publish “Maple Leaf Rag.”

(along with Marshall and Hayden, both of whom were African-American) coupled with the city's atmosphere conducive to their success account for Sedalia's allure to revivalists as the "cradle of ragtime."

But Sedalia is not just ragtime's homeland in an historic sense; since the establishment of the annual Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival there in 1974, several generations of younger revivalists have come to see Sedalia as once again the geographic focal point of ragtime activity. Like a phoenix that rises from its ashes, Sedalia has become a powerful symbol in the ragtime community, indicative not only of ragtime's past, but of its rebirth and restoration as a "living tradition." The Joplin Festival<sup>13</sup> is not the only annual ragtime festival, but it is the longest-lived, largest, and most important, bringing together each year the most geographically diverse group of enthusiasts of any festival. I have attended and performed at the Joplin Festival every summer since 2006, and my discussion of the festival in this chapter draws largely on my own experiences there. My comments are also informed by interviews I have conducted with other performers, attendees, and festival organizers, as well as my own archival research using documents and audio-visual recordings furnished by the Scott Joplin International Ragtime Foundation and private individuals.

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<sup>13</sup> Because the festival's full name is rather cumbersome, for sake of convenience, I will frequently refer to it simply as the "Joplin Festival."

#### 4.1.1 All ragtime roads lead to Sedalia

*Everyone should experience Sedalia to really understand much of the music of Scott Joplin.*  
*THE RAG TIMES*<sup>14</sup>

Driving south along Route 65 in western Missouri, one imagines that the scenery has changed little in the past century. The fifteen-mile stretch from Interstate 70 south to Sedalia remains largely undeveloped; modest houses dot the landscape, but for the most part, the gently rolling plains on either side of the road are home to grasses, shrubs, and scattered trees, with the occasional billboard sprouting up among them. (One billboard in particular seems to be something of a local institution: an invitation to the annual “Testicle Festival” in the nearby town of Olean.) Following the road into Sedalia leads travelers directly into the city’s historic downtown, and—if it is the first week of June—the middle of the annual Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival.

Ordinarily, Downtown Sedalia is rather quiet. In recent years, many businesses in this city of 21,000 have moved to the west side of town, nearer the Wal-Mart, Galaxy Cinema, and State Fair Community College. For the four days of the Scott Joplin Festival, however, downtown streets buzz with activity. Amidst modest two- and three-story buildings, many a century old, large tents are raised, banners unfurled, and temporary stages erected—some in the middle of side streets that have been closed off for the occasion. On the morning of the festival’s first day, trucks arrive from Kansas City, two hours away, delivering rented upright pianos to the three outdoor stages. Flags depicting

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<sup>14</sup> “Sedalia Festival,” *The Rag Times*, May 1976, 7.

the sheet music cover of Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" hang from street lights. Window displays of the cafés, offices, and antique stores that line the streets are given ragtime-themed makeovers with piles of artfully arranged vintage sheet music, pictures of composers and musicians, antique upright pianos, and mannequins dressed in turn-of-the-century attire. A few street vendor trucks sprout up near the largest tent to tempt festival-goers with corn dogs, funnel cakes, popcorn, pizza, clothing, and leather goods. Even the municipal trash cans on street corners bear the name "Scott Joplin" stenciled neatly in bright orange on their sides. A handful of local restaurants set out signs tempting visiting musicians with free meals in exchange for performance of a few rags.

Since the early 1980s, ragtime and the Joplin Festival have become integral to Sedalia's cultural identity. Though it is dwarfed by the annual Mississippi State Fair (a 10-day event that attracts approximately 350,000 attendees to Sedalia<sup>15</sup>), the Joplin Festival (which attracts perhaps 500 to 1,000 attendees annually) is widely touted—often second only to the State Fair—in promotional leaflets and brochures prepared by the Sedalia Convention and Visitors Bureau. The festival is also featured prominently on the City of Sedalia's official website.<sup>16</sup> The logo for the city's Visitors Bureau features four icons that represent Sedalia's history and primary attractions, arranged to form a square: (1) a theatre façade to suggest entertainment and the city's historic architecture, (2) a maple leaf with a musical staff and notes superimposed to represent the city's historic and ongoing association with ragtime, (3) a depiction of the main gate at the State Fairgrounds, and (4) a steam locomotive to represent the city's origins as a railroad town.

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<sup>15</sup> "2015 State Fair Theme: 'Show Offs Welcome,'" Missouri State Fair, accessed 6 October 2015, <http://www.mostatefair.com/2015-state-fair-theme-show-offs-welcome>.

<sup>16</sup> See [www.visitsedaliainmo.com](http://www.visitsedaliainmo.com) and [www.cityofsedalia.com](http://www.cityofsedalia.com).





**Figure 4.1 Logo of the Sedalia Convention and Visitors Bureau**

(used by permission)

Year-round reminders of the festival and ragtime are to be found around town: the Sedalia Municipal Building features a ragtime-themed mural by Eric James Bransby (painted 1976), the building at 205 South Ohio in Downtown Sedalia features a large outdoor mural of Scott Joplin seated at an upright piano (painted by Stanley James Herd in 1994), and the site of the former Maple Leaf Club where Joplin played is now the Maple Leaf Park (dedicated 1994), featuring several plaques that summarize Joplin's career and the role of ragtime in Sedalia's history. In addition, the Scott Joplin International Ragtime Foundation maintains a small office on South Ohio Street downtown and operates the Ragtime Store year-round, a small shop that sells ragtime-themed CDs, books, sheet music, and memorabilia exclusively.

If ragtime and the Joplin Festival are a fundamental part of Sedalia's cultural identity, the reverse is also true: Sedalia and the Joplin Festival have been central to building and maintaining the ragtime community. As the largest and longest-running ragtime festival, the Joplin Festival has—at some time in its history—brought nearly all members of the “core” ragtime community to Sedalia. Many of them return every year or every few years. For many ragtime enthusiasts, Sedalia is the place they first meet other members of the ragtime community “in person,” and for some it is the only place they reconnect with other ragtimers on a regular basis. The Joplin Festival's presence in Sedalia has meant that most in the present ragtime community have cultivated personal memories and friendships there—some over a 40-year period—and thus Sedalia is not only ragtime's “homeland” of more than a century ago, but it remains ragtime's “homeland” today.

David Reffkin has observed that

The name Sedalia has become synonymous with ragtime. It's referred to in publications, “This person said, in Sedalia...” or, “Something was documented in Sedalia...” In fact, I just received this tape a few days ago, from someone who sells piano rolls at the festival, and this tape album is called *Sedalia Serenade*. And... a piece of music co-written by four ragtimers, which was started on a napkin at the State Fair Motor Inn [in Sedalia is] called “Sedalia Joys.”<sup>17</sup> Sedalia is now just one of those names that is a household word for ragtime households.<sup>18</sup>

As Reffkin suggests, among those in the ragtime revival community, Sedalia is synonymous with ragtime; but more than that, it has come to serve as a symbol of

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<sup>17</sup> “Sedalia Joys” was composed by Peter Lundberg, Glenn Jenks, Wally Rose, and Edward A. Berlin. In the liner notes to his LP *Ragtime Alchemy* (Stomp Off S.O.S. 1179), Glenn Jenks tells the story of the origins of “Sedalia Joys”: “Four of us collaborated to produce this piece of Missouri fluff. Peter Lundberg came to me with an opening strain and asked if I could finish it. I suggested that I write the next one and send it on to Wally Rose, who recorded the first L.P. of ragtime in 1953. He could write the third and then send it to Ed Berlin, our New York ragtime scholar, for the conclusion. Ed calls this tune his ‘Opus 1/4!’”

<sup>18</sup> David Reffkin, “The Ragtime Machine,” *The Mississippi Rag*, November 1990, 19.

“authenticity.” Revivalists have referenced the city when naming compositions, musical ensembles, and even when describing performance style.

In the 1950s and 1960s, ragtime enthusiasts spoke often of a “Sedalia Style” that seems to have been intended largely to distinguish players of “classic” piano rags from the honky-tonk stylists of that era. Jim Kinnear, secretary of the Ragtime Society, wrote of a meeting with Trebor Tichenor at the Winnipeg home of ragtimer Barry Gibson in the summer of 1962: “Trebor was playing as we went downstairs, and until I saw him at the piano, I thought I was listening to Brun Campbell’s record. Trebor plays wonderful Ragtime, he plays it ‘Sedalia Style.’”<sup>19</sup> Kinnear does not seem compelled to explain what is meant by “Sedalia Style” other than to note that Tichenor played “most exuberantly, but at the same time in a very relaxed way.”<sup>20</sup>

Since 1960, Sedalia has been the namesake for more than a dozen ragtime works by almost as many composers. With the exception of Fred Hoepfner’s “Sedalia” (1960), all were composed during years that the Joplin Festival was active. Even if there is insufficient evidence to indicate that the festival itself was responsible for the compositions and their names, the link suggests the degree to which the festival established Sedalia as both an historical and modern epicenter of ragtime activity. Some of the compositions, like “A Dream of Sedalia” (Tex Wyndham, 1991) and “The Streets of Sedalia” (Galen Wilkes, 1987), seem to draw inspiration from the “historic” Sedalia of Joplin’s era, while others, like “Sedalia Stomp” (Galen Wilkes, 1983) and “Sedalia Joys—A Conversation in Ragtime” (Glenn Jenks, Peter Lundberg, Wally Rose, and Edward A. Berlin, 1987), would seem to

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<sup>19</sup> Jim Kinnear, “Special Events,” *The Ragtimer*, August 1962, 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

celebrate Sedalia of the revival era, suggestive not only of the physical place, but the happy confluence of ragtime enthusiasts there at festival time.<sup>21</sup> Table 4.01<sup>22</sup> provides a listing of fifteen ragtime compositions since 1960 whose names reference “Sedalia” directly. In addition, there have been others, like Martin Spitznagel’s “Train Town Rag” (2010), that reference Sedalia indirectly through allusions to its other features and historical associations.<sup>23</sup>

**Table 4.1 Ragtime revival compositions named in honor of Sedalia, Missouri**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Composer</b>
1960	"Sedalia"	Fred Hoeptner
1976	"Sedalia Syncopations No. 1"	Robert Darch
1983	"Sedalia Rag"	Dave Howard
1983	"Sedalia Stomp"	Galen Wilkes
1987	"Sedalia Joys—A Conversation in Ragtime"	Glenn Jenks, Peter Lundberg, Wally Rose, Edward Berlin
1987	"The Streets of Sedalia"	Galen Wilkes
1991	"A Dream of Sedalia"	Tex Wyndham
1993	"The Sedalia Rag"	Nick Taylor
1999	"Sedalia Queen"	William McNally
2001	"Sedalia Rag"	Tamás Ittzés
2005	"Marching Though Sedalia"	Fred Hoeptner
2010	"The Pride of 'Queen City' Sedalia"	Reginald Robinson
2010	"Train to Sedalia"	W. Brett Youens
2013	"The Sedalia Glide"	John T. Carney
2014	"Sedalia Shuffle"	Nathan Beasley

<sup>21</sup> Galen Wilkes explains that “‘Sedalia Stomp’ was written to honor the return of the Scott Joplin Festival in 1983 while ‘The Streets of Sedalia’ was inspired by vintage picture postcards I collected of Sedalia at the turn of the previous century. Lots of history is seen there, and still preserved for the most part, so that is the origin of that work.” Galen Wilkes, e-mail message to author, 13 October 2015.

<sup>22</sup> This listing was compiled in part with the help of Michael Mathew’s *A Ragtime Compendium*, a database of 16,754 ragtime compositions of the ragtime era and the ragtime revival era. See *A Ragtime Compendium*, accessed 12 October 2015, <http://ragtimecompendium.tripod.com>.

<sup>23</sup> Spitznagel’s “Train Town Rag” was the winning entry in a 2010 composition contest sponsored by the Scott Joplin Foundation — one of 23 “Train Town Rags” submitted by composers from across the United States and six foreign countries. The rules stipulated that the winning entry would be titled “Train Town Rag”; after the contest, the composers of non-winning entries were encouraged to re-title their works as they saw fit.

Sedalia has also inspired the naming of groups such as the Sedalia Ragtime Orchestra, a prominent West Coast ensemble based in Thousand Oaks, California. The Sedalia Ragtime Orchestra's director, Cary Ginell, explains that "I came up with Sedalia not only because of its historic importance to ragtime, but because it has an elegant sound to it, and I didn't want to be another group that named itself after a Joplin rag."<sup>24</sup> Many have adopted the city's name as part of their own to suggest musical "authenticity" and the sense of historical continuity that Sedalia provides.

So strong was Robert Darch's connection to Sedalia through ragtime that—although he never lived there—following his death in October 2002, his cremated remains were stored until they could be interred in Sedalia's Crown Hill Cemetery at a special ceremony on 8 June 2003 scheduled to coincide with the end of that year's Scott Joplin Festival.<sup>25</sup> Throughout his career as a ragtime pianist and entertainer, Darch had stressed the importance of Sedalia in the history of ragtime. He visited Sedalia often; he produced two notable ragtime concerts there in 1959 and 1960, and he was a regular performer at the Scott Joplin Festival. Although he traveled worldwide to perform and lived at times in Michigan, Alaska, Nevada, and other parts of Missouri, his decision to be buried in Sedalia suggests that the town and its people (especially with the influx of ragtimers at festival time) were where he felt most at *home*. In 2015, members of the ragtime community still recall his funeral procession at the 2003 festival (complete with jazz band parade to the graveyard), with one attendee adding that "So many [ragtime] performers were in attendance that someone remarked that an earthquake or some similar horrific

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<sup>24</sup> Cary Ginnell, e-mail message to author, 12 October 2015.

<sup>25</sup> "'Ragtime Bob' Darch: 1920-2002 'Living a Ragtime Life,'" *The Rag Times*, November 2002, 8.

disaster would just about wipe out the ragtime genre."<sup>26</sup> Members of the ragtime community still organize a group visit to Darch's gravesite each year for a brief, informal memorial service. While the case of Bob Darch may not be typical, it illustrates the degree to which some ragtime enthusiasts identify with Sedalia.<sup>27</sup>



**Figure 4.2 Ragtime community members gathered at Bob Darch's grave during the 2013 Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival**  
(I am kneeling just to the left of the grave marker.)

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<sup>26</sup> John Remmers, e-mail message to author, 13 October 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Harry Hall and Dick Witcig (the latter of Sedalia) reported in 1968 that an effort had been made among a number of Sedalians (presumably in the early 1960s) to exhume Scott Joplin's remains from the New York cemetery where he was buried and rebury them in Sedalia. The plan was abandoned when it was learned that Joplin was buried in a common grave with several other individuals that would make positive identification of his remains impossible. See Dick Zimmerman, "Sedalia Rediscovered Joplin," *The Rag Times*, November 1968, 13.

## 4.2 SCOTT JOPLIN RAGTIME FESTIVAL PRE-HISTORY

*This community has been something less than appreciative of its ragtime heritage in the past, sitting by as others have taken the lead. Now it's time to see what can be done to put Scott Joplin on the map where he belongs - in Sedalia.*

SEDALIA DEMOCRAT  
22 April 1973<sup>28</sup>

Although Sedalia is now universally acknowledged among ragtime enthusiasts as the music's "capital," prior to publication of *They All Played Ragtime* in 1950, few residents of Sedalia, Missouri seem to have been aware of their city's connection to ragtime.

Considering the obscurity into which "classic" ragtime had fallen among the general public, there is little reason they should have been. Larry Melton, a teacher in Sedalia during the late 1960s and early 1970s has noted that in terms of local history, "[t]he Rawhide Trail period was flashier and more popular...and railroad history was at the 'meat and sinew' of the town's existence."<sup>29</sup> Even after Blesh and Janis's book appeared, significant local interest in ragtime was slow to materialize. Abe Rosenthal, director of the Sedalia Men's Choral Club, headed an effort in 1951 that placed a modest plaque in Scott Joplin's honor at Sedalia's Lincoln High School,<sup>30</sup> but it was not until 1959 that the first significant steps were taken to re-introduce ragtime to Sedalia. On 13 July 1959, Robert Darch—an itinerant ragtime pianist and historian then based in Virginia City, Nevada (when he wasn't performing at Club 76 in Toronto)—addressed the 275 members of the Sedalia Chamber of Commerce and convinced them to form a Scott Joplin Memorial

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<sup>28</sup> "Explore Potential of Joplin Festival," *Sedalia Democrat*, 22 April 1973, page unknown.

<sup>29</sup> Larry Melton, "Ragtime in Sedalia History" (unpublished manuscript, 2014), 4.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Committee.<sup>31</sup> On 23 and 24 November 1959 and again in November 1960, the Committee produced concerts hosted by Darch in the Lincoln High School auditorium that celebrated Sedalia's ragtime past and included performances by two important Sedalian ragtime veterans: Tom Ireland and Arthur Marshall, both of whom had been profiled in Blesh and Janis's book.<sup>32</sup> For the 1960 iteration, Darch invited Joseph Lamb to come from his home in Brooklyn, New York to participate,<sup>33</sup> an act that would appear to be designed to show Sedalians the extent to which a musical style cultivated in their own backyard had had repercussions in distant parts of the country. Joe Lamb's death following a heart attack on 3 September 1960 meant that he did not appear, though the concert (with other performers) took place. The Committee seems to have dissolved soon after the 1960 concert, and, following the dedication of a Scott Joplin monument near the site of the Maple Leaf Club in 1961, the 1960s saw few significant efforts to revive ragtime interest in Sedalia.<sup>34</sup> In early 1972, Dick Zimmerman observed that "[t]he current recognition of Joplin in Sedalia is an annual recital of some of his music. The sheet music then goes back in the drawers for another year."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> "Ragtime Bob' Darch, 1920-2002, 'Living a Ragtime Life,'" *The Rag Times*, November 2002, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Trebor Jay Tichenor, "Missouri Ragtime Revival," *The Rag Times*, January 1971, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Carol Binkowski, *Joseph F. Lamb: A Passion for Ragtime* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 176.

<sup>34</sup> Melton, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Dick Zimmerman, "Treemonisha Premiers," *The Rag Times*, March 1972, 3.



### 4.3 THE FIRST AND SECOND SCOTT JOPLIN RAGTIME FESTIVALS (1974-1975)

HE: Do you like Joplin?

SHE: I don't know. I've never jopped. (Old Vaudeville Joke)

Everyone jopped in Sedalia, Mo. last week.

HUBERT SAAL  
*Newsweek*<sup>36</sup>

The first Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival in 1974 was born largely of the efforts of several Sedalia residents with an interest in local history, led principally by Larry Melton.<sup>37</sup> Melton had moved to Sedalia with his wife in 1965 at the age of 21. At the time, he was studying towards a Masters degree in history and working as a night duty police officer. His interest in history prompted him to look into Sedalia's past, and while he admits that he was not much intrigued by "the first two Sedalia R's" [Railroad and Rawhide], he became fascinated by ragtime, even though he had no prior musical experience. Even as he finished his degree and began teaching at the local all-black Hubbard Elementary School,<sup>38</sup> Melton (who is white) began collecting whatever he could that related to ragtime in Sedalia. He ran occasional advertisements in the local newspaper asking for old clippings, articles, photographs, sheet music, and recordings that he intended to develop into a museum exhibit. His efforts reportedly elicited some interest from Sedalia's white

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<sup>36</sup> "Glad Rags," *Newsweek*, 5 August 1974, 59.

<sup>37</sup> I am grateful to Larry Melton for sharing with me the details of his time in Sedalia and his efforts to organize the first Scott Joplin Festival. I conversed at length with Melton at the 2015 Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival (June 3 - 6), and he graciously shared with me a copy of his unpublished paper "Ragtime in Sedalia History." That paper, and my interviews with him form the basis of this section.

<sup>38</sup> Melton notes that in 1971, Sedalia schools were only just beginning what he calls a "very sloppy and negatively motivated" desegregation process.

community, but “total indifference in the black community.”<sup>39</sup> When Melton learned that Joplin’s opera *Treemonisha* was to be staged for the first time in Atlanta in January 1972, he and his family traveled to see it. At the premiere, he met Max Morath, Eubie Blake, and several other notable ragtime performers, and he describes the trip as a “life changer.” “I was sensitive to the history that was being made,” he recalls, “and getting to mingle with the celebrities was an inspiring experience.”<sup>40</sup> Melton shared with Morath and Blake his idea for a Joplin-oriented ragtime festival in Sedalia, and he was encouraged by their “overwhelmingly enthusiastic” response. “For the next 3 years, every spare minute was given over to ragtime research and to finding out about the current performers,” he writes.<sup>41</sup>

When Melton approached the Sedalia Chamber of Commerce in April 1973 to propose a Scott Joplin Music Festival, national interest in Scott Joplin among the general public was already mounting. Joshua Rifkin’s 1970 LP of Joplin’s rags for Nonesuch had become the label’s first record to sell a million copies,<sup>42</sup> and a second Rifkin-Joplin LP in 1972 was proving nearly as popular.<sup>43</sup> The Chamber’s president, Jake Siragusa, and its board voted unanimously to lend their approval and support,<sup>44</sup> and Melton soon secured the support of local civic clubs like the Jaycees as well.<sup>45</sup> In a letter published in the *Rag Times*, Melton expressed his hopes for the festival:

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<sup>39</sup> Dick Zimmerman, “Treemonisha Premiers,” *The Rag Times*, March 1972, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Melton, 11.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> “About Nonesuch Records,” Nonesuch, accessed 9 October 2015, <http://www.nonesuch.com/about>.

<sup>43</sup> “Best Selling Classical LP’s,” *Billboard*, 1 July 1972, 21.

<sup>44</sup> “Sedalia, Missouri - The Cradle of Classical Ragtime - Plans 1974 Scott Joplin Festival,” *The Ragtimer*, May 1973, 6.

<sup>45</sup> Melton, 17.

For some time now I have dreamed of a real production here, where it all began [Sedalia]. Nearly everyone I have written or talked to in the field has agreed that it would be most appropriate if such a program were on a scale commensurate with Joplin's current following. I feel we envision such an effort. In summary, we plan a three day festival, named after Joplin and intended to promote classical ragtime through a competition of new undiscovered talent and the performance of established talent. Much of the festival is planned for presentation on or near the original site of the Maple Leaf Club and some kind of appropriate structure is planned. It is intended that this be an annual affair... I have been amazed at the unbelievable enthusiasm for local funding. Since we are well into a five figure cost, it may not be possible to fund it here entirely, but I am confident of other support... Support and interest have been virtually unanimous and it seems impossible that it has been dormant for so long. The Black community is as excited as the rest of Sedalia and it promises to be a total effort... I honestly feel I am correctly expressing the present atmosphere here. I admit it must seem unrealistic in light of the past attitude, but something has changed... So, here we are. I'm almost too excited to write coherently... Believe it or not, I'm not worried about money, at least not right now. I believe it will come.<sup>46</sup>

In this letter, as in his writings elsewhere, Melton's invocation of the term "classical" ragtime (in lieu of "classic" ragtime as favored by most revivalists) suggests that he presented Joplin's music—and ragtime in general—to potential festival backers as music more akin to the European "old masters" than to either popular music or jazz. While "classic" implied a level of sophistication in form and execution that was inwardly-focused within the ragtime genre, the term "classical" openly invited comparisons with other European "art music" composers from Mozart to Schubert and Chopin. While Blesh and Janis had been quick to point out that ragtime bore few stylistic similarities to Mozart and Chopin,<sup>47</sup> in the wake of Rifkin's recordings on a well-known "classical" label (Nonesuch), general audiences came to regard instrumental ragtime of Joplin and his contemporaries as a subset of "classical" music, and Melton likely found it easier to pitch

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<sup>46</sup> "Sedalia Discovers Joplin," *The Rag Times*, May 1973, 6-7.

<sup>47</sup> Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They All Played Ragtime* (New York: Oak Publications, 1971), xiii.

the idea of a ragtime festival in those terms. From the late 1960s to the early 1970s, there had been little if any change in Sedalia's local leaders, and yet, Melton noted that in that short time, those who had once shown indifference now appeared "down right interested."<sup>48</sup>

By June 1973, an official Scott Joplin Festival Steering committee had been established, with Melton as its chairman.<sup>49</sup> In the months that followed, the committee's plans for the festival— ranging from budgetary estimates to festival venue arrangements to a proposal that the U.S. Postal Commission issue a commemorative Scott Joplin stamp— were regularly reported in the local *Sedalia Democrat* and reprinted by both *The Rag Times* and *The Ragtimer*. The regular updates for more than a year prior to the festival ensured that ragtime enthusiasts far from Sedalia were able to send suggestions, offer support, and make plans to attend.

As news of the proposed festival spread beyond Sedalia, a number of prominent ragtime performers and historians indicated their intention to attend. Max Morath, William Bolcom, Robert Darch, Eubie Blake, and Rudi Blesh all consented to appear, prompting the *Sedalia Democrat* to write in in June 1973 that "[t]he most encouraging news so far is the willingness—if not the eagerness—of several top ragtime artists to come to Sedalia and perform. Initial indications are that they will do so for a nominal fee, being rewarded by the pleasure of playing in Sedalia, where ragtime blossomed and broke forth around the

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<sup>48</sup> "Sedalia Discovers Joplin," 7.

<sup>49</sup> "Sedalia Plans Joplin Festival," *The Rag Times*, July 1973, 8. This is a reprint of an article that appeared in the *Sedalia Democrat*, 20 June 1973.

turn of the century."<sup>50</sup> While at the *Treemonisha* premiere in Atlanta in 1972, Melton had met Dick Zimmerman, the notable ragtime pianist who was also a co-founder of the Maple Leaf Club in Los Angeles and editor of its newsletter, *The Rag Times*. Because Melton felt that his own lack of musical training made him ill-suited to take charge of the festival's artistic aspects, Zimmerman was brought in to serve as music director—responsible for directing all of the festival's musical events (contests, concerts, etc.).<sup>51</sup>

Despite the ready support of the Chamber of Commerce and other civic clubs, despite the willingness of several prominent ragtime musicians—white and black—to perform, and despite Melton's early claim that the African-American community was "as excited as the rest of Sedalia" for the festival, by late 1973, the *Sedalia Democrat* reported growing discontent among the members of an African-American group on Sedalia's North Side called "Partners For Progress." They objected to the festival because they viewed it as an effort to "exploit Joplin for the economic advantage of a privileged few."<sup>52</sup> Racial tensions were still high in the immediate aftermath of Sedalia schools' poorly-managed integration, which included the closure of the all-black Hubbard school where Melton taught, leading Partners For Progress to express their frustration that "the same social, economic and political forces that discriminated against Joplin still exist today [1973]."<sup>53</sup> The Festival's organizers and supporters responded that they were not trying to exploit Joplin, but rather to "give him his long-overdue recognition here in Sedalia where ragtime began." "The festival," they wrote, "in fact, is designed to have just the opposite effect, by

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<sup>50</sup> "Sedalia Honours Favourite Son," *The Rag Times*, July 1973, 5. This is a reprint of an article that appeared in the *Sedalia Democrat*, 21 June 1973.

<sup>51</sup> Dick Zimmerman, "Joplin Returns to Sedalia," *The Rag Times*, September 1974, 2.

<sup>52</sup> "Why Take it out on Scott Joplin," *Sedalia Democrat*, date and page number unknown (c. late 1973).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

focusing national attention on the contribution of a great black American composer."<sup>54</sup> At a special meeting, Melton and Siragusa appealed directly to members of Partners For Progress, but were only partially successful in assuaging the community group's concerns.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, plans for the festival moved forward, the *Sedalia Democrat* observing that "[i]f the Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival is to await the arrival of a social, economic and political Utopia in Sedalia, it will never be held."<sup>56</sup>

When local fundraising efforts were not as successful as Melton had hoped,<sup>57</sup> in the weeks leading up to the first festival, a number of Sedalians and ragtime enthusiasts from as far away as New York and Boston volunteered to help with set construction and decoration. Members of the State Fair Community College summer theatre group built stage backdrops; members of the local Jaycees helped to prepare Sedalia's Main Street, and others assisted with publicity.<sup>58</sup> Melton himself painted signs for the festival by the major highways leading into town. *The Ragtimer* and *The Rag Times* made mention of the festival in nearly every issue during the year before, with Dick Zimmerman not-so-modestly proclaiming that it promised to be the "single greatest ragtime event ever."<sup>59</sup> Peter Avramenko, a 16-year old ragtime enthusiast from New York City, hitchhiked to Sedalia to help with the preparations, as did Gary Stubblefield, who hitchhiked from

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Melton, 14.

<sup>56</sup> "Why Take it out on Scott Joplin."

<sup>57</sup> Melton, 20.

<sup>58</sup> Melton, 17.

<sup>59</sup> Dick Zimmerman, "The Sedalia Joplin Festival July 25-28," *The Rag Times*, March 1974, 1.

Canton, Ohio.<sup>60</sup> Other early arrivals included David Reffkin, then a student at the New England Conservatory of Music.

From 19-21 July 1974, just days before the first Scott Joplin was scheduled to begin, Sedalia was host to another music festival that threatened to derail the Joplin event. The "Ozark Music Festival," produced by Musical Productions, Inc. (MPI) of Kansas City, had been presented to Sedalia officials as a bluegrass and "pop rock" event and scheduled for the Missouri State Fairgrounds, approximately two miles from downtown Sedalia. MPI assured Sedalians that no more than 50,000 tickets would be sold, yet by some estimates, between 150,000 and 250,000 people attended, lured by a roster of performers that included Aerosmith, Blue Öyster Cult, The Eagles, America, Lynyrd Skynyrd, the Charlie Daniels Band, Bob Seger, and Ted Nugent, and advertisements that assured festival-goers "no hassles guaranteed." Indeed, security was minimal, and drug use, nudity, and open sex were rampant. Temperatures hovered over 100 degrees Fahrenheit all three days, and some festival-goers became unruly. Sedalia was unprepared for such a large event, leading to clogged roadways and food and water shortages. Farmers complained to officials of livestock stolen and slaughtered by festival-goers who were either hungry, intoxicated, or under the influence of drugs.<sup>61</sup> Weeks later, a senate select committee of state legislators formed to investigate the festival wrote "The Ozark Music Festival can only be described as a disaster. It became a haven for drug pushers who were attracted from throughout the United States. The scene made the degradation of Sodom and Gomorrah appear mild.

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<sup>60</sup> Melton, 18.

<sup>61</sup> Donald Bradley, "Film looks back at 1974 Sedalia rock festival," *The Washington Times* (24 July 2015). <<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jul/24/film-looks-back-at-1974-sedalia-rock-festival/?page=all>> (Accessed 13 October 2015).

Natural and unnatural sex acts became a spectator sport...Frequently, nude women promoted drugs with advertisements on their bodies... Motorcycle gangs perpetrated acts of extortion, rape, and physical violence."<sup>62</sup> The aftermath left \$100,000 worth of damage, including a "mountain of human waste and dirty syringes."<sup>63</sup> The city of Sedalia moved swiftly to prohibit any further rock music festivals—a ban that would be upheld for nearly forty years.<sup>64</sup> The Ozark Music Festival ended on a Sunday, and many Sedalians were understandably apprehensive about welcoming another music festival on Thursday.

Despite the recent trauma of the Ozark Music Festival and the frantic clean-up effort that followed, the Joplin Festival began on time the morning of 25 July 1974, and by many accounts, the festival was a "huge success."<sup>65</sup> After "all the... unpleasant incidents," wrote one attendee at the first Joplin Festival, "[t]he conservative ragtimers seemed to be a welcome relief to Sedalia...[t]he concerts were well supported by the locals, who seemed to regard it as a sort of community project."<sup>66</sup> Another attendee agreed: "Sedalia was full of ragtime enthusiasts who conducted themselves in a somewhat different manner than did the participants in a rock concert held the week before and accordingly the town responded and showed their pride in their ragtime heritage."<sup>67</sup> Over its four days, the Joplin Festival featured a ragtime performance contest, daily concerts, and organized and

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<sup>62</sup> "35 years after Ozark Music Festival, witnesses and attendees reminisce" by Alan Scher Zagier in the *Columbia Missourian*, 17 July 2009.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> "Joplin Returns to Sedalia," 1.

<sup>66</sup> Ray West, "The Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival," *The Ragtimer*, September 1974. Reprinted from the Potomac River Jazz Club's newsletter *Tailgate Ramblings* (August 1974).

<sup>67</sup> Pel Bell-Smith, "The Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival, Sedalia, Missouri - July 25th - 28th, 1974," *The Ragtimer*, September 1974.



informal “swap meets” (for the buying, selling and trading of ragtime-related sheet music, records, and memorabilia).

Symposiums under the direction of Dr. Addison Reed<sup>68</sup> were held at the Hubbard School, intended as a forum for the presentation of scholarly research on topics of ragtime interest. At least nine presenters including Rudi Blesh, Jerry Atkins, William Bolcom, Jan Douglas, Max Morath, Peter Lundberg, Robert Darch, Al Rose, and Terry Waldo discussed such topics as the genesis of ragtime, interpretation of ragtime, ragtime form, and ragtime composers (including Scott Joplin).<sup>69</sup> By some accounts, however, symposium presenters turned increasingly to the piano that had been provided for demonstrations so that the symposiums ultimately offered “more good piano playing than talk.”<sup>70</sup>

Festival attendance was strong for the entire weekend, driven by an especially strong performer line-up and the nationwide fad for Scott Joplin’s music that had arisen in the wake of *The String*. A capacity crowd of 1,300 people attended the Friday night concert, and, like the Saturday afternoon concert, it had to be repeated to accommodate all attendees.<sup>71</sup> Zimmerman reports that the festival’s five concerts drew a combined audience of over 5,000. Headlining performers for the weekend included Eubie Blake, Max Morath, Robert Darch, Wally Rose, Terry Waldo, William Bolcom and Joan Morris, Trebor Tichenor and the St. Louis Ragtimers, and the New England Conservatory Ragtime Ensemble, whose recording of Joplin rags from the so-called “Red Back Book” was that

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<sup>68</sup> In 1973, Reed had completed a PhD dissertation at the University of North Carolina titled “The Life and Works of Scott Joplin.”

<sup>69</sup> West, 12.

<sup>70</sup> Bell-Smith, 11.

<sup>71</sup> “Joplin Returns to Sedalia,” 2.

week still *Billboard's* top selling classical LP (after 54 weeks on *Billboard's* charts).<sup>72</sup> The festival operated on a \$15,000 budget,<sup>73</sup> and, according to Zimmerman, made a “modest profit.”<sup>74</sup>

Besides the concerts, one of the major events of the festival was a contest held—according to the festival’s music director, Dick Zimmerman—“not to find out who could play the hottest ragtime, but to encourage and reward good playing of classic ragtime...not boogie, stride, jazz, or honky tonk.”<sup>75</sup> The contest was judged by Rudi Blesh, Terry Waldo, Trebor Tichenor, Abe Rosenthal (conductor of the Sedalia Symphony), and William Bolcolm, who also served as master of ceremonies. The preliminary round lasted from 10:00 AM until 5:00 PM, with thirty-nine contestants competing in two categories: piano and string instruments. “Maple Leaf Rag” and “The Entertainer” were popular choices of the contestants, whose ages ranged from young to old.<sup>76</sup> Zimmerman described the performances as ranging from “poor to excellent with the general standard being rather low.”<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, twelve finalists were selected, and they competed for the top prizes (\$100 in the strings category and \$500 in the piano category) as part of a more formal concert that night. Guitarist Steve Hancoff of Omaha, Nebraska won the string category by playing Scott Joplin’s “The Ragtime Dance,” and Bob Long of Los Angeles won the piano category with “St. Louis Tickle” by Theron C. Bennett. Because Long was a semi-professional pianist who played regularly in a Shakey’s Pizza Parlor, there were

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<sup>72</sup> “Billboard Best Selling Classical LP’s,” *Billboard*, 20 July 1974, 36.

<sup>73</sup> Dave Dexter, Jr. “Rag Glide Into New Fest-Concert Areas,” *Billboard* (10 August 1974), 25.

<sup>74</sup> “Joplin Returns to Sedalia,” 3.

<sup>75</sup> “Joplin Returns to Sedalia,” 2.

<sup>76</sup> Bell-Smith, 10.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

some who felt he had an unfair advantage over the other contestants, nearly all of whom were amateurs.<sup>78</sup> Others, like violinist David Reffkin, who took second place in the strings category, did not seem bothered by the presence of professionals, citing the contest's stated goal of inspiring better ragtime performance.<sup>79</sup>

When it was over, word spread quickly among the ragtime community that the Joplin festival had been a "ragtimer's paradise."<sup>80</sup> In the festival reviews and write-ups that appeared in *The Ragtimer*, *The Rag Times*, and the newsletters of other local traditional jazz clubs, writers who had attended were generally complimentary of the musicians and their performances, of the festival's management, and of the overall atmosphere. As the largest and most widely promoted ragtime-only festival to that time, the Joplin Festival attracted ragtime enthusiasts from across the United States and abroad, affording many attendees their first opportunity to see and meet other enthusiasts face-to-face. Many were optimistic about what such an event meant for the future of the ragtime community. Home in Los Angeles a few weeks after the festival, Dick Zimmerman mused:

The performers, many of whom had never met, had a very rewarding experience in getting to know each other. No one put down anyone else for any reason. Each musician was respected for what he did since he did it well, and everyone gained a respect for his fellow artist, a respect which in some cases had been lacking due to previous unfamiliarity with an artist's work. Contacts between musicians, collectors, historians, journalists, educators, and ragtime fans should benefit everyone in the future.<sup>81</sup>

The second ragtime festival in Sedalia—from 25-27 July 1975—was a smaller, more intimate affair. While the first festival had attracted some attention and comment in

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<sup>78</sup> Tom Schmutzler, *The Rag Times*, January 1975, 3.

<sup>79</sup> David Reffkin, "Rag Contests," *The Rag Times*, May 1975, 8.

<sup>80</sup> Tex Wyndham in "Letters," *The Ragtimer*, September 1974, 19.

<sup>81</sup> "Joplin Returns to Sedalia," 3.

mainstream news outlets, by the summer of 1975, the general public's fascination with Joplin was on the wane, and mainstream coverage of the festival was virtually nonexistent. Even *The Ragtimer* and *The Rag Times* featured far fewer promotional notices in the months leading up to the festival.<sup>82</sup> The curious and enthusiastic Sedalians who had boosted 1974's festival attendance were largely absent in 1975.<sup>83</sup> With fewer attendees to accommodate, all of the festival's events were held in Sedalia's Liberty Park Concert Hall.

Feeling that the name "The Sedalia Scott Joplin Festival" might be too restrictive (and *passé* besides), Larry Melton and other festival organizers changed the official name to "The Sedalia Ragtime Festival."<sup>84</sup> Like the previous year's festival, the main events included a series of concerts, symposiums, and organized swap meets for collectors. The musical repertoire heard at the festival continued to focus almost exclusively on "classic" ragtime; however, if the 1974 festival had been dominated largely by solo pianists, the 1975 festival's concerts cast the spotlight largely on ensembles, vocalists, and other instrumentalists. Bill Zinn's Ragtime String Quartet, The St. Louis Ragtimers, The Etcetera String Band, the New England Conservatory Ragtime Ensemble, banjoist Lowell Schreyer, and singers Ian Whitcomb (accompanied at the piano by Dick Zimmerman) and Joan Morris (with William Bolcom at the piano) headlined the concerts, which also featured

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<sup>82</sup> *The Ragtimer*, after only a brief four-sentence notice of the second Joplin/Sedalia festival towards the end of its May 1975 edition, inexplicably made no mention of the festival in its July 1975 edition, and offered no festival review in its September 1975 edition. *The Rag Times* offered only a brief two paragraph announcement of the festival (in addition to a full-page advertisement) in its July 1975 edition.

<sup>83</sup> "Sedalia Fest," 2.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

pianists Terry Waldo, William Albright, and Steve Pistorious.<sup>85</sup> As he had the year before, Rudi Blesh was present, and served as master of ceremonies for the concerts.

In 1975, the festival sponsored *two* contests—one for performance and one for composition—but this time, all contestants were required to submit their entries on tape in advance of the festival. Lowell Schreyer, a banjoist from Minnesota, won the performance contest and was invited to perform in the Friday evening concert. Three winners were selected in the composition contest—Tom Schmutzler (Hartford, Connecticut), Kathi Craig (Los Angeles, California), and Bill Rowland (Galena, Kansas), and all three performed their compositions in the Friday concert. Like the previous year’s festival, the 1975 festival ended with an informal outdoor concert in Liberty Park. Attendees set up lawn chairs, spread blankets, and brought picnic lunches.<sup>86</sup> Most of the weekend’s headline performers participated, along with a number of relatively “unknown” musicians.

When it was over, most assumed there would be a third festival the following year. Plans were soon announced for a 1976 festival in Sedalia to be held within a week of the St. Louis Ragtime Festival so that enthusiasts could easily attend both.<sup>87</sup> By November 1975, however, Larry Melton realized that plans for Bicentennial celebrations were siphoning local interest away from ragtime, and besides, he admits, “I was burned out.”<sup>88</sup> A brief notice in the March 1976 issue of *The Rag Times* announced that a 1976 festival in Sedalia looked “doubtful” because of a lack of local interest.<sup>89</sup> Shortly thereafter, Melton accepted a teaching position in Union, Missouri, 135 miles away, and in that spring, he

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Melton, 20.

<sup>87</sup> “Sedalia Fest,” 2.

<sup>88</sup> Melton, 29.

<sup>89</sup> “Bric-a-Brac,” *The Rag Times*, March 1976, 7.

and his wife left Sedalia for Union. After months of uncertainty, the *Rag Times* reported triumphantly in May that the Sedalia Ragtime Festival was back on track and scheduled for 30 July through 1 August 1976 thanks to the efforts of “local townsfolk.”<sup>90</sup> A full-page insert advertising the “Third Annual Sedalia Ragtime Festival” accompanied the newsletter, boasting a performer list that included Eubie Blake, Terry Waldo, the St. Louis Ragtimers, Dick Zimmerman, Ian Whitcomb, David Jasen, Rudi Blesh, and more, and promising “Seminars, Mini Shows, Jams, Evening Concerts, Cutting Contests,” and a “Poolside Finale.” The excitement was short-lived; an article in the *Sedalia Democrat* announced that on 10 June, less than two months before the festival, the thirteen-member board voted unanimously to cancel the event, citing poor ticket sales and unsuccessful fundraising efforts.<sup>91</sup> Of the \$17,000 needed, only \$2,500 had been raised, and most of that had come from out-of-town donors. Gary Evert, who had taken over as festival coordinator following Larry Melton’s departure, told the *Sedalia Democrat* that “the problem is that there is no public response... It’s like giving a party and no one coming.”<sup>92</sup> From 1976 to 1982, there were no ragtime festivals in Sedalia.

The return of the Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival in 1983—a revival of a revival movement—was instigated by the United States Postal Service’s issuance of a Scott Joplin commemorative stamp that year. As early as 1969, after the USPS issued a stamp in honor of blues composer W. C. Handy, ragtime enthusiasts had periodically organized efforts to

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<sup>90</sup> “Sedalia Festival July 30th,” *The Rag Times*, May 1976, 7.

<sup>91</sup> “Lack of Response Kills Festival,” *Sedalia Democrat* (11 June 1976), page number unknown. Reprinted in *The Rag Times*, July 1976, 1.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

petition the Postal Service to recognize Joplin with a stamp.<sup>93</sup> In the 1970s, several letter-writing campaigns organized by *The Rag Times* and a formal request by the Scott Joplin Festival committee in Sedalia had met with swift, unexplained rejections from the Postal Service.<sup>94</sup> Undeterred by the Postal Service's rejections and the demise of the Scott Joplin Festival in 1976, a small contingent of ragtime supporters in Sedalia led by Bill Hopkins continued to appeal to the Postal Service for a Joplin stamp.<sup>95</sup> They were joined in October 1980 by the Northern Virginia Ragtime Society, a group of Washington D.C.-area enthusiasts who enlisted the aid of Kentucky Congressman Romano L. Mazzoli in their petition for a Joplin stamp.<sup>96</sup> Mazzoli was able to rally the support of other members of Congress, and in July 1981, the Postal Service announced plans to issue a Joplin stamp as part of its "Black Heritage Series" in 1983. The stamp's design was unveiled in a 16 July 1982 ceremony aboard the Goldenrod Showboat in St. Louis—site of the yearly St. Louis Ragtime Festival since 1965.<sup>97</sup> That same month, plans were announced for a return of the Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival to coincide with release of the Joplin Stamp in June 1983.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> "A 'Handy' Stamp," *The Rag Times*, May 1969, 9.

<sup>94</sup> "Sedalia Joplin Festival," *The Rag Times*, September 1973, 3.

<sup>95</sup> "Joplin Stamp in '83!" *The Rag Times*, January 1982, 1.

<sup>96</sup> "Scott Joplin Commemorative Postage Stamp," *Northern Virginia Ragtime Society*. <<http://www.nvrs.org/aboutragtime.htm#JoplinStamp>> (Accessed 18 October 2015).

<sup>97</sup> "Joplin Festival in '83!" *The Rag Times*, July 1982, 1.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

#### 4.4 THE SCOTT JOPLIN FESTIVAL SINCE 1983

After a hiatus of eight years, the Scott Joplin Festival was reborn as the Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival, the addition of the words “International” and “Ragtime” meant to reflect the growing number of non-American performers to the lineup (and encouraging foreign tourists to visit) while also subtly suggesting that a broader sampling of ragtime would be heard in addition to Joplin’s music. The ragtime resurgence of the early 1970s had focused almost exclusively on Joplin. Following their use in *The Sting*, several of Joplin’s pieces in particular (“The Easy Winners,” “Solace,” “Pine Apple Rag,” and especially “The Entertainer”) had become so ubiquitous that, in the words of one enthusiast I interviewed from St. Louis, “they were everywhere... you could not go out in public, you didn’t turn on the radio [without hearing them]—that’s how pervasive they were.”<sup>99</sup> The meteoric rise in popularity and resultant overexposure meant that many soon tired of the limited repertoire. New followers drawn to the music soon sought to supplement their listening, performing, and collecting habits with the music of other, lesser-known ragtime composers as well as “novelty,” stride, and early jazz composers. By the early 1980s, ragtime enthusiasts had come to expect more than Joplin at a ragtime festival.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Bryan Cather. Interview with the author, 16 February 2011.

<sup>100</sup> Jack Rummel, a noted ragtime composer, performer, and critic, in 2015 reviewed a CD in which I had participated and described its contents by saying that it “truly covers the waterfront, with early, classic and contemporary ragtime, stride, novelty, boogie, and early jazz all represented – in short, a typical 21st century ragtime concert.” See “Ragtime Music Reviews,” accessed 31 October 2015, <http://www.ragtimers.org/reviews>.



The festival has since been held every year since 1983, typically in the first week of June. As of 2015, the Joplin festival is the largest annual event in the world devoted specifically to ragtime. The festival is produced by the Scott Joplin International Ragtime Foundation (SJRF), a non-profit organization that describes its mission as to “promote an understanding and appreciation of Joplin’s contribution to ragtime music, along with the historic importance connected with Sedalia, Missouri.”<sup>101</sup> In addition to the festival, the Foundation hosts an annual week-long artist-in-residence program (usually in February), in which a single pianist is invited to the Sedalia area for a series of ragtime-themed presentations at local schools and to perform several solo public concerts. The SJRF also maintains the “Ragtime Store,” a small shop operated year-round offering recordings, sheet music, shirts, mugs, tote bags, and other ragtime-related merchandise. The SJRF issues a bi-annual newsletter, the *Sedalia Rag*, which contains festival updates, reviews, and reports of other Foundation activities.

The SJRF operates on a modest budget and obtains its funding through donations, ticket sales, merchandise sales at the Ragtime Store, and grants from the Missouri Arts Council and Sedalia Tourism Commission. The SJRF has only one paid full-time employee, the Foundation Director; the Foundation’s board and other positions are filled by volunteers. Board members are drawn from the local community, and most have some musical background, though few are involved with music professionally. Former Foundation Director Stacy Purvis described the board members to me, saying that they are

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<sup>101</sup> Scott Joplin International Ragtime Foundation website: <<http://www.scottjoplin.org/foundation.html>> (Accessed 4 May 2011).

not necessarily ragtime performers or historians themselves, but they are bound by a desire to see the festival succeed.<sup>102</sup>

In recent years, attendance has averaged between three and four thousand visitors per year over the course of the festival's five days. Roughly a quarter of those visitors are local Sedalians, another quarter are Missouri residents, and out-of-state visitors account for half of festival attendees.<sup>103</sup> The statistics suggest that for most attendees, the festival is a destination involving significant investments in time and money to attend. According to a survey conducted by the SJRF at the festival in 2010, most attendees return to the festival every year or nearly every year. In 2010, only fifteen percent of respondents were first time visitors.<sup>104</sup>

The festival draws more than fifty performers each year, consisting primarily of pianists, but also accordionists, guitarists, violinists, and occasionally singers and small bands as well. Together with the festival's music director, the SJRF board selects the performers who will be invited. Potential festival performers come to the attention of the board in various ways: some are known from their recordings or appearances at other festivals, some are recommended by performers or audience members, but many come for the first time as audience members and make their talents known by performing in the handful of "open piano" slots scheduled at most venues. If board members in attendance

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<sup>102</sup> Stacy Purvis, interview with the author, 21 February 2011.

<sup>103</sup> This information was gathered from ticket sales slips, not surveys. Figures were provided during an interview I conducted with Foundation Director Stacy Purvis on 21 February 2011.

<sup>104</sup> The voluntary survey was included with the festival's printed program booklet distributed to ticket-buying attendees. 89 respondents completed the survey. Attendance estimates include the total counted at all events over the entire duration of the festival; some attendees may be counted several times.

are impressed, if reaction from the audience is favorable, and if the festival's budget allows, the performer may be invited to return as a paid performer the following year.

Invited musicians typically receive a stipend for the week from the SJRF, though some volunteer their performances for free. For most performers, the payment is modest: several hundred dollars to help offset the cost of travel and lodging expenses. Headline performers may command considerably more (as much as several thousand dollars).<sup>105</sup> My informal conversations with festival performers from 2006 to 2015 suggest that most of them are not drawn by any financial incentive, but rather the opportunity to commune with other ragtime enthusiasts, see friends, and the prestige of being associated with the festival. Still, I have spoken with several performers who admit that they no longer attend or perform at the festival because it is not profitable for them; some are professional musicians for whom attending the festival would mean giving up more lucrative jobs elsewhere.

Performers tend to be considerably younger than members of the audience. While responses to the SJRF survey in 2010 suggest that roughly eighty percent of audience members are over the age of 65, the reverse is true of the musicians: the vast majority of festival performers are under the age of 60, with many in their teens, 20s, or 30s. Several factors may account for this striking age difference between performer and audience. As Scott Joplin himself observed in 1908, "[t]hat real ragtime of the higher class is rather difficult to play is a painful truth which most pianists have discovered."<sup>106</sup> Even for accomplished pianists, performing ragtime often requires intense concentration and

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<sup>105</sup> Stipend information comes from interviews with other performers at the Scott Joplin Festival from 2006 to 2010.

<sup>106</sup> Scott Joplin, "The School of Ragtime." (New York: Scott Joplin, 1908), 2.

significant physical exertion; many performers find the festival's demanding four-day schedule of solo sets and concert appearances mentally and physically tiring (especially when coupled with the heat of Sedalia in June, since most venues are outdoors where temperatures may reach 90°F or more). In some cases, older performers I interviewed admitted that they had no interest in traveling to Sedalia to perform under such exhausting conditions. In addition, responses to the SJRF's 2010 festival survey suggest that audiences there favor musicians who can deliver energetic, technically "clean" performances; one respondent complained that some "performers seemed tired and uninterested" while another suggested "drop[ping] some of the older performers."

The festival's exact schedule and list of performers changes slightly from year-to-year, but the general format remains the same. The following paragraphs describe a "typical" festival schedule since I began attending the Joplin festival in 2006.

Action on the opening day of the festival is centered approximately two miles from downtown at State Fair Community College on West 16th Street. Beginning at ten o'clock in the morning, the main cafeteria is home to the first free venue of the festival: attendees seat themselves at the long cafeteria tables to watch (and listen) to a scheduled list of performers who play twenty-minute sets on an upright piano until four o'clock in the afternoon. Meanwhile, the festival "kickoff" concert (a paid, ticketed event) is held in the adjacent auditorium beginning at two o'clock.

Beginning the next day, and for the balance of the festival, four free official performance venues operate simultaneously from nine o'clock in the morning to five o'clock in the afternoon each day (though some may close an hour or two earlier). The

venues are scattered throughout the downtown area within a roughly six-block radius: one at a small park on East Main Street where the Maple Leaf Club, namesake of Scott Joplin's most famous rag, stood at the time of Joplin's residency in Sedalia; another at a small gazebo on South Ohio Avenue between Second and Third Street; the third is in Sedalia's restored train station, the Katy Depot located several blocks East on Third Avenue; the fourth and largest is located beneath a large tent dubbed "Stark Pavilion" on Fifth Street (which is closed off for the duration of the festival) outside the building that once housed John Stark's publishing business when Stark operated from Sedalia.

Each venue features at least one upright piano (new models rented from a piano store in Kansas City), properly tuned before the start of the festival and kept in tune throughout the week. Most venues are overseen by a master of ceremonies who introduces each performer. M.C.s are usually members of the Foundation's board, but increasingly since 2010, festival performers themselves are assigned M.C. duties at specified locations and times. The M.C. will introduce each performer, perhaps pausing to tell a joke or make an announcement, but the performers themselves are responsible for selecting and introducing the pieces they play. Performers are generally allotted twenty-minute slots, and festival-goers may purchase programs that detail the schedule of performers at all venues. No tickets are needed, so audiences are free to move from venue to venue. Consequently, the sidewalks are crowded with festival-goers (performers and listeners alike) hurrying from one venue to another to play their next set or hear their favorite musician. Corn dog and popcorn vendors set up on street corners beside bake sale tables and lemonade stands run by church groups, boy and girl scouts, and enterprising

children. Against it all is the backdrop of live piano music wafting around street corners from the amplified stages of the outdoor venues, or from the doorways of the dozens of unofficial venues; many of the shops and cafés have their own pianos, inviting festival performers to come in and play as they please.

In addition to the free venues, the festival hosts two formal, indoor concerts each day: one in the afternoon and one in the evening, for which tickets must be purchased. The concerts are typically themed, sometimes grouping performers (e.g., all “youth” performers or all women performers), other times grouping music by composers (e.g., an “all Joplin” concert or a concert of newly-written rags played by the composers themselves), or by stylistic subgenre (e.g., a concert of all stride or all novelty piano). Each concert involves roughly a half-dozen pianists who play two or three pieces each. Afternoon concerts compete with the free venues for audiences; the draw supposedly being that the concerts offer a more comfortable place for audiences to sit and perhaps more polished performances than they might hear at the free venues (though this is not always the case). In one of the few instances in which the Foundation exerts explicit control over musicians’ performances, musicians are asked to refrain from playing their “concert pieces” at the free venues. Evening concerts, held several miles away at Smith-Cotton High School, just off South Limit Avenue, are more heavily attended (they do not compete with free venues) and tend to be reserved for the headline performers.

While the free venues and the paid concerts serve as the festival’s main attractions, other events are scheduled throughout the week. Several months in advance of the festival, performers and scholars may submit proposals for one-hour research papers and

presentations to be delivered at symposiums held over two days. Topics may range from musical analyses of selected works to discussions of performance practice to composer biographies; the board selects from among the proposals, and presenters are typically offered modest honorariums. The symposiums provide a structured forum for researchers, musicians, and enthusiasts to interact. Other festival events include a ragtime dance with instruction, dinners at a nearby school cafeteria with live ragtime accompaniment, a vintage costume “fashion” contest, a party for donors to the Foundation, and perhaps most interesting of all, nightly “afterglow” parties.

Following the evening concerts, many performers and attendees retreat to a large banquet room at the Best Western hotel just up the road from the high school on South Limit for late-night afterglow jam sessions that begin around ten or eleven o’clock, lasting until four or five o’clock in the morning. In the center of the room, two upright pianos occupy a raised platform around which dozens of large round tables and accompanying chairs are set up. The mood is informal and no schedule is set. While attendees enjoy drinks (mostly alcoholic) from a cash bar, performers take turns at the pianos. With two pianos and an enthusiastic and supportive audience, many musicians use the opportunity to perform improvised duets with other performers, especially since many of them may see each other only at this one yearly event. At times, the jam session takes on the atmosphere of a friendly “cutting contest,” with each pianist attempting to out-do the one before him or her in demonstrations of musical speed and virtuosity. Occasionally, others in attendance may bring additional instruments (washboards, upright basses, drum kits, etc.) and join in. Many of the performers and festival-goers I talked with cite the afterglow

parties as the highlight of the festival; whether by alcohol, fatigue at the end of the day, or the friendly, low-key atmosphere, many pianists find their inhibitions relaxed and claim to reach their creative or musical peak during the afterglows.

The afterglows are also a time and place for socialization and “networking.” While audiences at the daytime outdoor venues and at all concerts are expected to remain quiet and attentive, the afterglows are always abuzz with conversation. Performers, organizers, and listeners alike mingle. Sometimes they talk about music, sometimes not. Collectors get together to swap sheet music or records. Performers get together to brainstorm duet performances for the next day’s concert. Many of the CD projects I have produced on my Rivermont label were born of conversations at Joplin festival afterglows. On more than one occasion, I have witnessed pianists quietly slip out the door to a keyboard elsewhere in the hotel to work out ideas for their own compositions or interpretations inspired by a performance (their own or another’s) at the afterglow. As the night goes on, the crowd gradually dwindles, leaving two or three tireless pianists who may take turns playing for each other and no one else.

On the morning of the last day of the festival, just hours after the final strains have been played at the last afterglow, the banquet room at the Best Western is reset for a breakfast buffet to mark the end of the festival. Most performers and attendees leave town before the breakfast, returning from whence they came, but those who stay enjoy each others’ company for a few final hours to the accompaniment of live music from a handful of the remaining pianists. By noon, the buffet is over, the final parting words spoken, and the festival quietly concludes for another year.



#### 4.5 SUMMARY

The Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival in Sedalia, Missouri was not the first festival of the ragtime revival, but it has become the largest and longest-lived of many ragtime festivals that have emerged since the 1960s. What started as the project of a few Sedalians to celebrate local history attracted the attention of many scattered ragtime enthusiasts eager to visit the “Cradle of Ragtime” to perform and listen to ragtime in a town historically associated with the genre. In the absence of any other national ragtime society or organization, the Scott Joplin International Ragtime Foundation and its annual festival has become the *de facto* authority within the ragtime community, an unofficial but generally accepted arbiter of authenticity. The city of Sedalia and the Joplin Festival offer the ragtime community with a powerful connection to ragtime’s past while also providing the framework in which community members see themselves as part of an “ongoing tradition.” In 2015, the Scott Joplin Festival in Sedalia remains the ragtime community’s most important annual event.

## 5.0 THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP OLD-TIME PIANO PLAYING CONTEST

For many ragtime enthusiasts, Memorial Day weekend and the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest herald the start of “ragtime season.” Although dozens of local and regional ragtime festivals take place at locations around the United States throughout the year, the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest in Peoria, Illinois<sup>1</sup> is usually the first of the calendar year to attract a sizable roster of performers and contestants who travel from around the country (and some foreign countries as well) to participate. Because the annual Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival and the nearly-annual Blind Boone Ragtime and Early Jazz Festival are often held in nearby Central Missouri the week following the Contest, the Contest marks the start of a “Grand Tour of Ragtime” that sees many of the same performers and audience members traveling directly from one event to the next over the course of two weeks.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Beginning in May 2016, the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest will be held in Oxford, Mississippi under the auspices of the University of Mississippi.

<sup>2</sup> I have made the complete “Tour” several times myself, which often consists of the following stops and events, beginning the Friday before Memorial Day.

Days 1-4 (Friday-Monday): World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest in Peoria, Illinois

Day 4 (Monday): Ragtime Rally at the Scott Joplin House State Historic Site in St. Louis, Missouri

Day 4-5 (Monday-Tuesday): Mimi [Blais] and Friends evening concerts in Versailles, Missouri

Day 6-9 (Wednesday-Saturday): Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival in Sedalia, Missouri

Day 10 (Sunday): Brian Holland and Jeff Barnhart ragtime concert at Osage Beach, Lake of the Ozarks, Missouri

Days 11-13 (Monday-Wednesday): Blind Boone Ragtime and Early Jazz Festival, Columbia, Missouri

What originally began in 1975 as a modest—even inauspicious—fundraiser for a local railway museum developed by the mid-1980s into an independent, self-sustaining annual event at the heart of the ragtime community dedicated to the preservation of “old-time” piano playing.<sup>3</sup> From its central location in Illinois, aided by opportune media exposure and an open, inclusive policy towards newcomers, the Contest attracted pianists from around the United States (and several foreign countries as well). Though not strictly a *ragtime* contest, piano rags and ragtime-era songs have been an integral part of contest repertoire from the start, and as the pianists and their repertoire have shaped the contest, so too has the contest—through the influence of its rules, policies, and atmosphere—come to shape musical performance, notions of authenticity, and community formation not only at the contest itself, but in the wider ragtime revival as well.

In order to survive and flourish, any musical revival movement must publicize itself and its selected tradition if it is to attract new audiences and practitioners. “Proactive dissemination, via a range of media,” write Juniper Hill and Caroline Bithell, “may be required either to help draw in and train new converts or to bring the musical output of revivalists to a wider audience.”<sup>4</sup> Effective publicity seldom stems from the efforts of a single individual, but usually requires the sustained, cooperative efforts of many, leading to the emergence of formalized institutions. Though ostensibly such institutions may act as benign agents of the movements they represent, they often become prime actors in

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<sup>3</sup> As I will discuss in more detail later, the Contest and its parent organization, the Old-Time Music Preservation Association, use the term “old-time” to denote American popular music of the 1890s-1920s; their usage of “old-time” should not be confused with the more common usage among scholars and many musicians to describe a type of Appalachian fiddle and string band music.

<sup>4</sup> Juniper Hill and Caroline Bithell, “An Introduction to Music Revival as Concept, Cultural Process, and Medium of Change,” in *Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*, ed. Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2014), 25.

shaping the revived tradition. In terms of the ragtime revival, I have already discussed such institutions as the major ragtime societies and publications as well as the Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival. In this chapter, I will examine the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest and discuss its role in promoting and fostering the ragtime revival community. Because the event's name is rather lengthy and even its abbreviation is cumbersome (WCOTPPC), in this chapter, I will often refer to it simply as the "Contest," there being no other significant ragtime-oriented contests with which to confuse it.

## 5.1 HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: CUTTING CONTESTS

Piano-playing contests are not merely products of the ragtime revival movement but have their origins in the parent ragtime tradition. Ragtime lore is rich with stories of "cutting contests"—public musical "battles" between individual pianists. Whether elaborately staged before pre-selected judges with explicit rules and an audience assembled for the occasion or informal impromptu affairs, the object of cutting contests is generally the same: two or more pianists take turns attempting to outplay (or "cut") all challengers, usually with virtuosic performances that demonstrate dexterity, arranging or improvising ability, breadth of musical knowledge, strength, and stamina. Contestants may compete for a prize or simply for "bragging rights." While many of the most widely-publicized cutting contests of the ragtime era took place in and around New York City, Edmond

Souchon and Jürgen Grandt have written of cutting contests in New Orleans,<sup>5</sup> the *RagTime Review* referenced contests in St. Louis,<sup>6</sup> and Tom Shea wrote of them in Detroit,<sup>7</sup> suggesting that they were likely a widespread phenomenon, to be found wherever pianists of a competitive nature mingled.

One of the earliest and best documented ragtime cutting contests occurred at Tammany Hall in New York City on 28 January 1900. The event was announced in the *National Police Gazette* and sponsored by its publisher, Richard K. Fox. Billing itself as “The Leading Sporting Journal in the World,” the *Gazette* appealed to a primarily male readership with a mix of sports and entertainment news, sensational and often grisly news stories from around the country, recipes for bartenders, and other miscellany, all with copious woodblock illustrations. A shrewd businessman with a sideshow barker’s temperament, Fox understood the value of a well-promoted and carefully-managed contest, both as fodder for his magazine’s reporters and for the direct profit to be made from event ticket sales and wagers—both above and below the board. While Fox and the *Gazette* concerned themselves primarily with boxing and wrestling matches, Fox also sponsored and promoted all manner of other contests, ranging from bicycle endurance feats to opening oysters to duck-egg eating contests, ultimately awarding “thousands” of

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<sup>5</sup> Edmond Souchon, II, “The Town is Ended...But the Melody Lingers On,” *The Record Changer*, February 1953, 3. See also Jürgen Grandt, *Kinds of Blue: The Jazz Aesthetic in African American Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004), 86.

<sup>6</sup> “Largest Gathering of Ragtime Artists in St. Louis Since 1914,” *The RagTime Review* 4, no. 3A (1965), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Tom Shea, “Bart Howard,” *The Ragtimer* 6, no. 3 (1967), 5.

championship medals, belts, and trophies.<sup>8</sup> Before the *Guinness Book of World Records*, Fox and the *Gazette* sought to report on top achievement in a wide variety of human activities, promising readers to settle any dispute in questions of a sporting nature. Thus, the *Gazette's* sponsorship of a ragtime contest did not necessarily stem from any personal affinity Fox may have felt for ragtime; rather, as the *Gazette's* announcement and its accompanying image of the “diamond-studded trophy” makes clear, the actual ragtime piano playing at the contest was merely another vehicle to the all-important trophy:

One of the liveliest competitions of the new year will occur at Tammany Hall, New York City, on the evening of Jan. 28, when the best piano playing talent of the country will meet to decide the rag-time playing championship, and what is by far more important, the ownership of the Richard K. Fox diamond-studded medal. This will settle a much vexed question, and one that has been raised ever since the coon melodies became popular... The acknowledged leader of the rag-time players is Mr. Michael Bernard, leader of the orchestra at Pastor's, and whose fame as a manipulator of the ivories has spread throughout the land. If ever there was a champion, he is one, and he proposes to defend that title against any ambitious piano-pounder who cares to play.<sup>9</sup>

Besides the brazen reference to contestants as “piano-pounders,” the *Gazette* seems to have published no rules for the contest in advance, suggesting an indifference to the contest's subject. Neither Fox nor his cohorts at the *Gazette* seem to have been interested in using the contest as a tool to promote a particular “vision” of ragtime other than—remarkably—to further popularize the notion of “piano only” instrumental ragtime at a

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<sup>8</sup> My assessment of Fox and description of the *National Police Gazette* comes in large part from my own examination of dozens of issues of the *NPG* available online at: <http://fultonhistory.com/my%20photo%20albums/All%20Newspapers/New%20York%20NY%20National%20Police%20Gazette%201844-1906/index.html>. See also William A. Mays, “About the NPG [National Police Gazette],” accessed 3 September 2015, <http://policegazette.us/About.html>.

<sup>9</sup> “Rag-Time Piano Players in Training to Contest for the Championship Police Gazette Medal,” *The National Police Gazette*, 20 January 1900, 6.

time when many in New York associated the music with vaudeville singers in blackface.<sup>10</sup> Although the *Gazette* named Bernard as the favorite to win, it went to great lengths to assure readers (and potential contestants) that the contest would be fair and that the “best man will win.” (Understandably, not all were convinced it would be fair, as published letters from readers reveal.) Surprisingly, although the *Gazette* sponsored the contest, it does not seem to have published the results; however, a colorful account of the contest—and one far more sympathetic to the *music*—appeared several days after the fact in the *New York Dramatic Mirror*:

An audience that tested the capacity of the hall was on hand, and...the excitement in the hall was intense as the seven judges took their seats and solemnly prepared to solve a very important problem. “Gents” filled with enthusiasm and other things leaned affectionately and heavily upon the shoulders of the judges, and “rooted” for their favorites, so the judges were forced to make their notes in hieroglyphics, so that the mob could not tell whether they approved or disapproved of the playing of the different contestants. The fun began at 1:40 A.M., when a nice looking young woman in a pink dress sat down at the keyboard. She was so nervous that she played very poorly... Next came a fat little German, who played fairly well. When he reached a certain part of his selection his brother slipped alongside to help, and they finished the piece as a duet, standing up at the piano. This disqualified the entry, and the duettists were promptly hustled off.<sup>11</sup>

After several additional contestants who played “very well,” the *Mirror* reported

an announcement from the master of ceremonies, which very nearly caused a riot. This gentleman, who was extremely officious, told the crowd that the judges had decided to bar members of the colored race. Then the whole assemblage played rag-time, jig-time and a cat-and-dog time, and it looked for a while as if there would be a little monkey-and-parrot time, but the judges came to the rescue and announced with one voice that they had made no rule against gentlemen of color...matters were finally straightened out and “Duke” Travers, an ebon-hued youth, with a wide smile, seated

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<sup>10</sup> David A. Jasen and Gene Jones, *That American Rag* (New York: Schirmer, 2000), 261.

<sup>11</sup> “Bernard is King of Rag-Timers,” *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, 3 February 1900, 18.

himself, while the crowd cheered. He played beautifully, without any attempt at fancy flourishes, but in perfect rag-time. His performance was greeted with uproarious applause. The next two were colored men, Lawlor and James by name, and they beat the long-suffering piano until they were stopped. Then came a man named Coleman, whose performance was very ordinary. "Mike" Bernard came last, and the greeting he received showed that he was the favorite of the assemblage. He was advised from all parts of the hall to "tear it to pieces!" "knock de ivories off de box, Mikey!" "make a rag carpet out o' dat piano!" and he also received other admonitions more forcible than elegant. He began by lifting the whole front of the piano off, so that the rag-time could be seen and heard by every one present. This created a lot of excitement among the other contestants, but it was finally agreed to allow him to perform with the piano open. He played with his usual expertness and received an ovation when he had finished.<sup>12</sup>

During the final round, three of the contestants were given two minutes to make "the best mince meat" of a popular song. Travers was one of the finalists, and he played "softly and soothingly, as before." Bernard was another finalist, and "did some of his brilliant work with 'I'd Leave My Happy Home For You.'" The judges exited the room to vote on the winner and revive themselves at the cafe. Upon returning, they announced that Travers had received two votes and Bernard five, making him the champion. "The decision met with popular approval, and when Bernard was handed the medal, he was cheered to the echo. Bernard is now the acknowledged rag-time champion of the United States."<sup>13</sup>

Besides being one of the earliest documented ragtime cutting contests, the *Mirror's* vivid description of the 28 January event provides one of the most detailed accounts of such an event during the ragtime era. Even if the format and rules of the 28 January contest are not typical of all ragtime cutting contests, the *Mirror's* observant reporter provides valuable clues into contest procedure, etiquette, as well as the kind of ragtime

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*



piano playing favored by the judges and the audience. It is worth noting that the contest was open to men and women, black and white, and there does not seem to have been any required audition before the contest. Contestants faced a strict five minute limit; the *Mirror* reports that at the end of five minutes, one performer was “chopped off suddenly in the middle of a swift run.” The contest was strictly between individual piano players who were free to play pieces from their own repertoire. Judges kept notes on each performance and convened to vote on the winner; members of the audience, though free to express their appreciation for each contestant with cheers and applause, had no formal say in determining the winner.

While the *Mirror* columnist’s references to the “long-suffering piano,” descriptions of contestants (of one is said “he hustled himself along like a bicycle rider who has just two minutes to make ten miles to beat the world’s record”), and choice of audience quotations (“make a rag carpet out o’ dat piano!”) suggest that the contest valued above all else a performer’s speed, strength, and stamina; even so, the runner-up, “Duke” Travers, is described as having played “softly and soothingly,” but in “perfect rag-time,” indicating that ragtime and breakneck tempos were not synonymous. That the audience responded to Travers with “uproarious applause” and that two of the seven judges voted for *him* to win reveals that the cutting contest may have been almost as much about musical ideas, technique, nuance, and poise as agility and brute strength. Nevertheless, one might suppose that by removing the piano’s front, Bernard wanted to dazzle his audience (including the judges) by enabling them to not only hear but see the notes he was playing, suggesting a fleet-fingered performance at a brisk tempo, and giving Bernard a distinct

visual advantage that displeased many of the other contestants. Despite aspersions cast on the contest before and during the event,<sup>14</sup> Bernard continued to trade on his triumph for at least another decade.<sup>15</sup>

If the *New York Dramatic Mirror's* review is any indication, Richard Fox's *National Police Gazette* ragtime contest seems to have been a critical and popular success; however, the *Gazette* seems to have made no attempt to repeat it. Nevertheless, it established a well-documented precedent for ragtime cutting contests, and when Ann Charters uncovered the *Mirror's* review in 1962 while researching Bert Williams, it was reprinted and circulated among ragtime enthusiasts in *The RagTime Review*, providing would-be festival and contest organizers an historical blueprint for reviving the ragtime cutting contest.

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<sup>14</sup> As part of its article announcing the contest, the *National Police Gazette* printed a statement from would-be contender Jake Schafer who questioned his ability to have a fair hearing on Bernard's "home turf."

<sup>15</sup> Bill Edwards notes an advertisement in the 9 April 1910 issue of *The Music Trade Review* which states that "Mike Bernard, the celebrated ragtime pianist, who, some years ago, won the Richard K. Fox gold medal for ragtime piano playing against a number of the most skillful performers who could be brought together in New York, is distinguishing himself in vaudeville..." See "Michael Barnet (Brown) Bernard," accessed 3 September 2015, <http://ragpiano.com/comps/mbernard.shtml>.

## 5.2 A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP OLD-TIME PIANO PLAYING CONTEST

*If you're a pianist with a flair for honky tonk and don't mind playing on the platform of a caboose on the prairie, \$800 could be waiting for you in a railroad.*

UNSIGNED AP ARTICLE  
*Observer-Reporter* (Washington, PA) 24 April 1984

The inaugural World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest was held on Sunday, 25 May 1975 as a benefit for the Monticello & Sangamon Valley Railroad Historical Society in Monticello, Illinois. Ted Lemen, one of the Railroad Society's founders and also a self-taught pianist with an interest in ragtime-era popular music, organized the first Contest to take advantage of the lingering popularity of ragtime in the wake of *The Sting*.<sup>16</sup> In 1967, while still an undergraduate at Illinois Wesleyan University, Lemen had witnessed first-hand the ability of a musical contest to attract attention when he participated in a Bloomington, Illinois piano marathon sponsored by a local Wurlitzer dealer. With fifteen contestants at fifteen pianos in a local shopping mall, the object for each contestant was to play as long as possible without repeating any pieces. Though Lemen didn't win the \$1,000 prize (he stopped after 57 hours and 31 minutes, finishing in eighth place), he noticed the sizable crowds that gathered to hear the contestants play. Thus, when seeking to attract customers to ride the Railroad Society's steam locomotive, he conceived of an "old-time" piano music contest.<sup>17</sup> Lemen notes that there was no particular reason for choosing a piano contest to promote the Railroad Society other than

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<sup>16</sup> Ted Lemen, interview by Bryan Wright, 19 December 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Although in many circles "old-time" refers to rural folk music of pre-mass media North America, to avoid changing the wording of my informants, I will use the term "old-time" in this chapter as they do: to indicate primarily the songs of "Tin Pan Alley," from the 1890s-1920s, and to a lesser extent the piano rags, blues, and other forms of popular music in the United States at that time.

it served his dual interests in music and railroads: “If I hadn’t liked music, I still would have liked trains, and it would have been ‘old antique car day’ or whatever the sideshow-barker kind of guy like I am can pull out my hat and say ‘We need a crowd.’ It settled on music because I knew something about it.”<sup>18</sup>

A caboose provided the stage for an upright piano on which four contestants competed in front of a gathering of about forty spectators. With few, if any, formalized rules, contestants played several selections each: primarily popular song standards of the early twentieth century with arrangements improvised largely on the spot. The winner the first year was Joybelle Squibb (1905-1996), a former silent film accompanist-turned-“golf-playing granny from Vandalia (Illinois)” in Lemen’s words.<sup>19</sup> The success of the initial contest led Lemen to organize a second contest the following year that attracted more than double the number of attendees. (Squibb won again.) Though he hoped the contest would grow and attract additional contestants and larger paying crowds, Lemen admits that his ambitions for the contest in its first few years were modest; neither he nor the other organizers saw it as much more than an annual Memorial Day side attraction for the Railway Society.

In the years that followed, the contest grew rapidly. Sparked by a nationally syndicated *Chicago Sun-Times* article about the contest and winner Joybelle Squibb (and her subsequent appearance on television’s nationally-broadcast *Mike Douglas Show*) the

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<sup>18</sup> Ted Lemen, interview by Bryan Wright, 19 December 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Unless otherwise noted, my source for many of the details regarding the history and development of the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest is an unattributed article (authored by Ted Lemen, according to my 19 December 2014 interview with him) titled “35 Years of Contest Memories” that appeared in the Contest’s 2010 program booklet. I also have relied on interviews with Ted Lemen and longtime contest coordinator Judy Leschewski.

third contest in 1977 saw roughly a dozen contestants and some six hundred spectators. To accommodate the crowds, the event was expanded to two days. Judy Leschewski was one of the new contestants in 1977. Speaking of her performance that year—the only year she competed—she recalls: “I got through it, let’s put it that way. [Laughs] I got very nervous, but I got through it. I was happy with myself. Of course, I didn’t win anything. We didn’t know...what the order was at that time, because there were no rules to speak of—just a few. I asked Ted [Lemen] where I placed and he said ‘I don’t know.’ I said, ‘You don’t have a line-up of where you placed?’ and he said ‘no.’ And I said ‘I think you should.’ That was something I shouldn’t have said, I suppose. He said ‘Would you want to help? Can you type?’ I said ‘yes’ and ‘yes,’ and so, that’s how I got interested in it and started working in the contest.”<sup>20</sup>

Lemen and Leschewski, who had not met prior to the 1977 contest, began working together to promote the event and formalize the rules and judging rubric. Both had been raised in households in which one or both parents sang in barbershop quartets, and both Lemen and Leschewski credit much of their interest in “old-time” music to the songs they heard at home in their youth. Leschewski herself has sung for much of her life in a Sweet Adelines group, and in considering contest rules and a judging rubric for the piano contest, the two turned to those used by the Sweet Adelines and many other barbershop societies. A list of rules and a sample judging form may be found in Figures 5.01 and 5.02.

Another feature of the piano contest inspired by barbershop gatherings was the “afterglow” party—an evening fixture by the contest’s third year. At large, otherwise

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<sup>20</sup> Judy Leschewski, interview by Bryan Wright, 20 December 2014.

impersonal barbershop meetings and contests, Lemen had been impressed by the informal evening get-togethers that provided the settings for strangers to meet, visit, and sing with each other. Afterglows for the piano contest were held at first at a Shakey's Pizza Parlor in 1977, and from 1978 onwards at a bowling alley nearer the contest site where pianos were set up on the lanes and in the lounge. At the loosely-structured afterglows, pianists (contestants and audience members alike) were invited to perform at the pianos while the audience ate, drank, and visited.

Even as attendance at the contest grew in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Leschewski explained that neither she nor Lemen had any long-term plans for the contest. "We didn't think it was going to last," she says, adding

We weren't sure how people felt about the music. It was at the Railway Museum and the restrooms were outside and people were hopping tracks and they had canes and wheelchairs and we had no place to sit. It was either hotter than blue blazes, or, one time we had a windstorm—everybody looked like raccoons. I got sunburned so bad one year I think it must have been second degree burns. Stuff like that. We thought under those circumstances it wouldn't last... Most of the people that were coming were older—because they liked the music—and they had no business in outdoor bathrooms or hopping tracks.

The fickleness of Illinois weather in late May coupled with less-than-ideal facilities at the Railroad Society prompted Lemen and Leschewski to consider moving the piano contest to another venue, and in 1986, the contest moved to the Monticello High School Football Field. That year also saw the addition of a Junior Division to more fairly accommodate contestants under eighteen years of age. Unfortunately, the 1986 contest was severely hampered by heavy wind, rain, and the nationally staged "Hands Across America" event that interrupted proceedings.

## Combined Rules - 2011 World Championship Old-time Piano Playing Contest

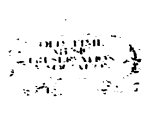
1. The contest will take place Saturday and Sunday, May 28 & 29, 2011 at the Hotel Père Marquette in Peoria, Illinois.
2. Contestants (18 years of age and older) must compete in the Preliminary Elimination (PE's) on Saturday in order to advance to the Semi-Finals and Finals, which take place on Sunday. The PE's will begin at 9:00 a.m. on Saturday, May 28, and continue until each contestant has been heard (with a lunch break scheduled for approximately 12:00 until 1:30). The Semi-Finals will begin at 1:00 p.m. on Sunday, May 29, including up to ten (10) Regular Division contestants who have advanced from the PE's.
3. The Semi-Finals will narrow the field of regular division contestants to the final five (5), who will then compete immediately in the Finals to determine the winner and other finishing places. The winner will receive \$1,350, a golden medallion and possession of the contest's "Traveling Trophy" for one year. Second place will receive \$800 and a silver medallion. Third place will receive \$550 and a bronze medallion. Fourth and fifth places will be awarded cash prizes of \$400 and \$250, respectively & appropriate medallions. Each contestant receives one annual membership in the sponsoring organization, OMPA.
4. Contestants need to prepare six different selections written no later than 1929 (no medleys allowed), one of which shall be a BALLAD, STANDARD POPULAR SONG, Not a piano rag. The music must be memorized. Two selections are played in the PE's. Each player who advances into the Semi-Finals will play two more selections that meet contest requirements. Contestants will provide the title, composer and year written for all selections to be played on their official entry blank and must be prepared to document composition's age, if challenged. Contestants must play the selections indicated or be disqualified.
5. Point totals are cumulative. Point totals from the PE's determine contestants for the Semi-Finals. Point totals from the Semi-Finals will be added to the point totals from the PE's to determine the top five (5) players who then advance to the Finals.
6. Judges will award points in each round based on technique, style and interpretation, showmanship and costume. In the event of a tie in points for any place, that contestant with the higher point total in technique will prevail, with the order of the other tie breaking categories to be: style & interpretation, showmanship, & costume.
7. Contestants who advance to the Finals will play two (2) additional selections, one of which shall be a RAILROAD THEMED TUNE. The judges will then combine the points from the PE's, Semi-Finals, and Finals to determine the winner and other places.
8. For the PE's, Semi-Finals and Finals, a total of eight (8) minutes playing time is allowed for each contestant's performance of both tunes.(not including time for audience applause, interview time with the emcee, etc.). Contestants exceeding the time limits will be penalized five (5) points for each fifteen (15) seconds, or fraction thereof, of overtime.
9. No religious or patriotic selections are allowed, and vocal or instrumental accompaniment is prohibited. For the purpose of the World Championship Old-time Piano Playing Contest, the following definition of "Old-time" music will apply: The style of piano playing found primarily in public venues of performance between 1890 and 1929, particularly in bars and ragtime competitions, consisting of popular songs of that era, including traditional jazz, ragtime and early stride-BUT excluding chord progressions more commonly found after 1930, including chords with 11th's and 13th's. Selections may also include music idiomatic to piano performance and popular dance.
10. Contestants must report to the Green Room at 7:30 AM on Saturday prior to the PE's. Lots will be drawn for order of play and important instructions will be given at this time. Any contestant not reporting at this time will be eliminated from the contest. If the contestant is not on hand when the playing position is called in any competition, the contestant will be disqualified. Order of play for the Semi-Finals and Finals will be drawn on stage as soon as practical after completion of judging.
11. Each entry blank must be accompanied by a \$30 entry fee that is non-refundable unless the contest is canceled.
12. The use of alcohol or other controlled substances prior to or during competitions may result in disqualification.
13. Any contestant selected champion for three (3) consecutive years will retire as undefeated and may not compete again.
14. Costumes are required, and the judges will award points based on their old-time appearance or authenticity in the PE's, Semi-Finals and Finals. Contestants will declare on the entry form whether their costumes are to be judged as authentic period dress (actual or replica) or theatrical performance-type, and they will be judged accordingly.
15. On stage, contestants need provide only the title and composer of their selections prior to their playing although additional information may be requested by the contest M.C. during their on-stage interview. Composer names must appear on each entry.
16. Challenges to a contestant's selection must be made within five (5) minutes after the playing of the selection has been completed. Other contestants, contest officials and judges may challenge selections for age or other reasons. In the event that a selection does not qualify after it is challenged, the person playing it will be disqualified.
17. The World Championship Old-time Piano Playing Contest is not responsible for the cost of travel, meals, lodging or other expenses incurred while competing. The contest will provide each contestant with up to four (4) complimentary all events tickets for their use. Contestants should advise when entering how many tickets are needed.
18. The total number of contestants is limited to the first 26 paid entries. Entry form MUST HAVE the song titles listed in CORRECT ORDER with NO changes made after deadline of entry date. Beginning Feb.1, 2011, until the deadline (May 13, 2011) entries will be accepted from up to 16 regular contestants and 10 junior contestants. After the deadline, any remaining slots will be filled from the waiting list on a first come basis without regard to regular or junior divisions. No entry will be considered received unless accompanied by the appropriate entry fee.
19. Entries must be sent to the contest via US mail to the contest's official address: World Championship Old-time Piano playing Contest, 108 E Garwood, Champaign, IL 61820. Entries will be accepted until 7:30 AM on Saturday May 28, 2011 & or the limit of 26 contestants has been reached. A late fee of an additional \$30.00 shall apply to entries received after the deadline of May 13, 2011
20. By competing in the contest, participants agree to allow the use of their photographs and recorded performances to promote the event.
21. Disputes arising from the competitions or judging will be resolved by the contest judges, who will make the final decision.

### Additional Provisions Applicable Only to the Junior Division

22. Junior contestants (17 years of age and younger) do not advance beyond the first round (Preliminary Elimination). Following the Preliminary Elimination, the Junior Champion is named, and is awarded a prize of \$250, & a permanent trophy. A second place prize of \$125; third place prize-\$100; fourth place prize-\$60 and fifth place prize-\$40 will be awarded. The Champion is invited to make a special appearance the following day to entertain on stage.
23. The entry fee of the Junior Division is \$10, except for any late entry penalty as provided in the Regular Division rules above.
24. The penalty for playing in excess of the time limits prescribed is five (5) points for each 30 seconds, or fraction thereof, of overtime.
25. Contestants in the Junior Division must have their entry blank signed by a parent or guardian.
26. Any Junior contestant winning the division a total of three (3) times (not necessarily in consecutive years) may no longer compete in the Junior Division. However, the age requirement will be waived and he or she may compete in the Regular Division.



Figure 5.1 Rules of the 2011 World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest



**World Championship**  
**OLD-TIME**  
**Piano Playing Contest**  
 Box 4714, Decatur, IL 62525



**CONTESTANT** \_\_\_\_\_

Circle Appropriate Choice : Prelims      Semi-Finals      Finals      Junior      Senior

**CATEGORY 1- TECHNIQUE** comments

1. FINGER DEXTERITY	1	2	3	4	5	_____
2. NOTE ACCURACY	1	2	3	4	5	_____
3. PEDAL USE	1	2	3	4	5	_____
4. KEYBOARD COVERAGE	1	2	3	4	5	_____
5. MUSICAL DIFFICULTY	1	2	3	4	5	_____
6. MUSICAL VARIETY	1	2	3	4	5	_____
Possible points this Category - 30	<b>TOTAL</b>					_____

**CATEGORY 2- STYLE & INTERPRETATION** comments

1. TEMPO	1	2	3	4	5	_____
2. RHYTHM	1	2	3	4	5	_____
3. ARTICULATION & PHRASING	1	2	3	4	5	_____
4. CONTRAST & DYNAMICS	1	2	3	4	5	_____
5. INTERPRETATION	1	2	3	4	5	_____
6. ORIGINALITY	1	2	3	4	5	_____
7. PREPARATION	1	2	3	4	5	_____
8. MUSICALITY OF PHYSICAL PRESENTATION	1	2	3	4	5	_____
Possible points this Category - 40	<b>TOTAL</b>					_____

**CATEGORY 3 - SHOWMANSHIP** comments

1. STAGE PRESENCE	1	2	3	4	5	_____
2. POISE & COMMAND	1	2	3	4	5	_____
3. SALESMANSHIP OF THE MUSICAL PRODUCT	1	2	3	4	5	_____
4. AUDIENCE RAPPORT/HANDLING APPLAUSE	1	2	3	4	5	_____
Possible points this Category - 20	<b>TOTAL</b>					_____

**CATEGORY 4 - COSTUME**  
 CONTESTANT WILL HAVE DECLARED WHETHER COSTUME IS DESIGNED TO BE AUTHENTIC TO THE PERIOD OR THEATRICAL & WILL BE JUDGED ACCORDINGLY.

Circle one: AUTHENTIC      REPLICIA

1. COSTUME	1	2	3	4	5	_____
2. MAKE-UP & GROOMING	1	2	3	4	5	_____
Possible points this Category - 10	<b>TOTAL</b>					_____

**POSSIBLE POINTS ALL CATEGORIES - 100** **FINAL SCORE** \_\_\_\_\_

Additional Remarks & Suggestions \_\_\_\_\_

**JUDGE'S NAME** \_\_\_\_\_

5= SUPERIOR 4= EXCELLENT 3= GOOD 2=FAIR 1=NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

SONG # 1 \_\_\_\_\_ Song #2 \_\_\_\_\_

**Figure 5.2: Score sheet from the 2011 World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest**



Although the piano contest was a fundraiser for the Monticello & Sangamon Valley Railroad Historical Society (renamed the Monticello Railway Museum in 1982), from its first year, no Railroad Society staff had been involved with planning or running the event with the exception of Ted Lemen. Ron and Judy Leschewski, George and Barbara Schuler, Larry Wade, and a few others unaffiliated with the Railroad Society but possessing an interest in “old-time” music had become increasingly involved with the contest’s operations. Following the 1986 debacle, the contest severed ties with the Railroad Museum—a move that would give contest organizers greater flexibility in scheduling when and where the event would be held as well as greater control of the contest’s finances. As a self-sustaining, independent operation no longer beholden to the Railroad Museum, the piano contest had more resources at its disposal for promotion and for securing a more suitable venue. For the 1987 contest (and the two that followed) the event was moved indoors to a Holiday Inn in Decatur, Illinois nearly thirty miles away. Holding the contest at a hotel not only made it more attractive to out-of-state contestants, but it enabled the afterglow parties to be moved “in house,” and public party rooms were established to accommodate jam sessions. With the move, the entire contest was extended from a two-day daytime event to a full weekend event.

The introduction of an official contest piano changed the tone of the event in more ways than one. For much of the contest’s first decade, participants and organizers recall that the piano used was usually a nondescript “modern” upright. When Ron and Judy Leschewski bought a house in 1986, they became owners of a large 1883 Weber upright piano left by the previous owner. At some point in the piano’s history, a coat of white

paint had been applied, obscuring the original rosewood color. The Leschewskis affectionately dubbed it “Moby Dink” because of its massive size and white color, and, pending successful restoration, they offered it for use in the contest. A “Piano Pals” fund was established, and friends of the contest contributed donations for the piano’s restoration. The piano was refurbished with new pins, hammers, and felts, and the original ivory keys were repaired. The white paint was stripped away and, refinished to its native rosewood, the instrument made its debut as the official piano of the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest in 1988. The piano’s visual impact, unusual “bird cage”-style action (in which the dampers are above the hammers, not below), and bright, percussive timbre have become well-known to contestants and attendees alike; the piano itself has contributed significantly to the character of the contest, coloring the sights, sounds, and musical arrangements that make the contest what it is.

With the contest no longer operating as a fundraiser for the non-profit Monticello Railway Museum, Lemen, Leschewski, and the other volunteer organizers sought official non-profit status for the contest itself. “We needed to have an umbrella organization that had historical and educational connotations,” Lemen says, “so, in 1990, we formed the Old-Time Music Preservation Association, Inc., to be the organization that would run what had become a popular and self-sustaining contest.”<sup>21</sup> Since 1990, the Old-Time Music Preservation Association, Inc. (commonly abbreviated “OMPA”—a clever onomatopoeic reference to the left-hand octave-chord patterns found in most ragtime) has operated with its own by-laws and board of directors chiefly to run the annual piano

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<sup>21</sup> Ted Lemen, e-mail to Bryan Wright, 3 January 2015.

contest. Between 1990 and 2015, the contest format and rules changed little, though workshops, master classes, sing-a-longs, and concerts were added to the schedule. 1997 saw the introduction of a “New Rag” contest to encourage the composition of new ragtime works. While the “New Rag” contest has remained a relatively minor component of the weekend’s proceedings, it nevertheless is the only part specifically dedicated to “ragtime.” (OMPA is often at pains to point out that while the umbrella term “old-time” incorporates ragtime, the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest is not a “ragtime” contest *per se*. I will discuss the distinction in the following section.) From 1990 through 2001, the contest was held at the Holiday Inn in Decatur, Illinois. Following management changes at the Decatur Holiday Inn and citing a “need to expand the scope and accessibility”<sup>22</sup> of the contest, it was moved again in 2002 to the Hotel Père Marquette in Peoria, Illinois, which is where I experienced it on seven occasions between 2003 and 2011. When the Père Marquette closed for extensive renovations at the end of 2011, the contest moved to the Embassy Suites in East Peoria.

In early 2015, citing dwindling audiences, rising costs, and general fatigue among the aging OMPA leadership, many members of which had been involved with the contest since shortly after its inception, OMPA announced that the 2015 Contest would be the last. In a message mailed with promotional materials for the final Contest, Lemen expressed his thanks to OMPA members for their past support and noted—rightly—that the Contest had been “the first exposure to this music for many of the players you see in

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<sup>22</sup> “35 Years of Contest Memories.”

photos from Ragtime festivals all around the country."<sup>23</sup> In the hopes of attracting a star-studded roster of contestants for the final year, rules were relaxed to allow the participation of past champions forcibly retired after winning three consecutive contests. In the weeks following the "final" Contest, past participants, judges, and attendees rallied in support of the Contest. On 8 August 2015, Ian Hominick, a noted classical pianist and past Contest judge, announced in an e-mail that he and the OMPA board had arranged for the Contest to be moved to Oxford, Mississippi, to be held in future years under the auspices of the University of Mississippi.

In its early years in Monticello, the Contest attracted little attention from the larger ragtime community, with only brief mentions in *The Ragtimer* or *The Rag Times*—when such publications mentioned the contest at all. In many cases, participants were as old or older than the selections they played, and most hailed from the upper Midwest, leading *The Rag Times* to quip that "none of the world's greatest old-time pianists will ever enter such a small town contest. Ma[yb]e the small town contest should bestow a title more in keeping with its size and stature."<sup>24</sup> As the contest became more firmly established in the middle 1980s, the larger ragtime community took more note, though not always kindly. Many among the "classic ragtime" enthusiasts objected to the "stereotypical...saloon image of the past" the contest sought to evoke.<sup>25</sup> Dick Zimmerman expressed his frustration in *The Rag Times*:

[T]he ragtime movement...in the Fifties and Sixties suffered a near mortal blow by this type of stereotypical image. It took all of the efforts of serious ragtimers like Max Morath and Joshua Rifkin to make the public realize that

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<sup>23</sup> Ted Lemen, untitled message to OMPA members, May 2015.

<sup>24</sup> "World Champion Old-time Piano Player?" *The Rag Times*, September 1978, 12.

<sup>25</sup> Dick Zimmerman, "Old Time Piano Contest," *The Rag Times*, July 1988, 8.

ragtime was not synonymous with hokum and fake nostalgia...If you decide to enter, learn some well-known singalong favorites and wear a flashy vest and sleeve garters looking like you stepped off a 1958 honky tonk record jacket. The audience will love it. Never mind that none of the judges necessarily know the difference between [Pete] Wendling, [Charley] Straight, [Zez] Confrey, or [Willie] Eckstein...or know what saloon pianists really wore."<sup>26</sup>

Despite his protests, in the early 2000s, Zimmerman himself became an entertainer and dealer at the Contest (though not a contestant), and it was at the Contest where I first met him in 2005.

### 5.3 THE CONTEST EXPERIENCE

In this section, I will offer a summary of my experience at the Contest between 2003 and 2011.<sup>27</sup> Because the rules, procedures, and basic schedule of events varied little from year to year during the years I attended regularly, what follows is an amalgam intended to represent a typical year at the Contest during that time and not the detailed schedule of any given year. After 2011, changes in the OMPA board and Contest leadership coupled with changes in venue in 2012 and 2016 and the retirement of "Moby Dink" following the 2014 contest have brought corresponding changes to the overall atmosphere of the Contest, even if the contest's guiding principles and basic schedule of events remain largely the same.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> I attended and competed in the contest in Peoria the following years: 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2011.

Although it attracts many of the same performers and attendees as the Scott Joplin Festival, the atmosphere at the Contest is markedly different. With the exception of a pre-contest riverboat cruise, all official contest-related activities take place in a single hotel in downtown Peoria. The city's relatively small downtown is largely made up of office buildings (including the headquarters of construction equipment giant Caterpillar, Inc.), and over Memorial Day weekend, the streets are eerily quiet: most of the offices and the handful of sandwich shops that serve them go dark. With few options for food or entertainment elsewhere, many contest attendees spend the entire weekend in the contest's host hotel, visiting in the common areas, sharing meals in the house restaurant or bar, and making music in the ground-floor salons specially-equipped with upright pianos for the event.

The weekend's activities begin late Friday morning with a two-hour luncheon cruise aboard the Spirit of Peoria, a paddlewheel riverboat. The closed-in lower two decks are outfitted with tables, chairs, and upright pianos, while the open-air top deck features a steam calliope. Guests wander from one deck to another, stopping at a buffet on the main deck to fix drinks and small plates of sandwiches, salads, meatballs, bread, desserts, and other "finger foods." It is "meet and greet" time for attendees and contestants alike: for many, it is a time for reconnecting with ragtime friends they have likely not seen since the previous year. Amidst the introductions, handshakes, and hugs, contestants of all ages informally take turns at the pianos. Sometimes, contest judges or other musicians in attendance join in. Many of the pianists are returning contestants who already know each other: for them, the informal setting provides a low-stress environment for showing off

new pieces learned since the previous year. For contest newcomers, the cruise provides an opportunity to get to know the other contestants, and all of the pianists use the time to gauge each other's abilities. Contestants are often eager to know what pieces the other contestants have prepared for the contest, and while many will willingly share their contest set lists with each other, most are careful not to play their contest pieces, preferring to keep their arrangements secret until they perform them in the contest itself.

After the out-and-back cruise is over, most contest attendees return to the hotel where they take several hours of "free time" to visit with each other, take a nap, or make plans for an early dinner. Whatever they do in the interim, most reconvene at seven o'clock Friday evening for the "New Rag Contest." While other ragtime festivals occasionally host ragtime composition contests as special events (to commemorate a notable anniversary or in honor of a particular ragtime personality), the New Rag Contest at the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest is the only *annual* ragtime composition contest.

Each year, up to ten composers may enter the New Rag Contest for a nominal fee.<sup>28</sup> First prize is modest: one hundred dollars in cash and a "remarkably small trophy," suggesting that the incentive for most entrants is not necessarily the prize, but the participation in the contest itself (a chance to publicly perform their work) and "bragging rights" for the winner. Until 2010, the contest required that composers be present to play their own works, but since 2011, composers have been permitted to designate a pianist to

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<sup>28</sup> As of 2012, the New Rag entry fee is \$10.00 is paid in advance, and \$20 if the contestant is a "walk-on" (provided open contest spots remain).

play their works for them if they wish. The rules and requirements are rather simple and straightforward:

- The composition entered must be an original rag, with three or more themes, that has not been previously published, recorded for sale, or previously played in the contest.
- Composition will be judged on originality, musicality, and audience appeal.

With such limited guidance, the rules become interesting for what requirements they do *not* specify. No restrictions are made on melodic or harmonic construction, and no mention is made of that ragtime keyword: syncopation. Except for the requirement that the work contain at least three “themes,” the rules do not insist on any of the conventions of “classic” ragtime (such as a left-hand “oom-pah” bass line that alternates low octaves with midrange chords, regular 16-bar sections, or AABBACCDD form). Written scores are not required, though some contestants offer them to the judges voluntarily. As might be expected, the New Rag Contest attracts composer-pianists of widely varying backgrounds and skill levels. The vast majority of contestants are amateur musicians, and while some also participate in the weekend’s flagship *playing* contest, some come solely to participate in the New Rag Contest.

The New Rag Contest is held in a smaller, more intimate room and on a different piano than the main contest. An audience of roughly a hundred (including many of the weekend’s contestants) seat themselves in banquet chairs in rows three-to-four chairs deep aligned with three of the room’s four walls. Some sit at round tables in the room’s center. The New Rag Contest piano, a rather ordinary upright on loan from a nearby used piano



dealership, rests on the floor against the fourth wall, a single microphone behind it to amplify the sound through the room's public address system. A master of ceremonies calls the New Rag Contest to order and introduces the three or four judges who sit together at a round table just to the right of the piano. Contestants' names are written on slips of paper and drawn from a hat to determine order of play. As each contestant's turn arrives, he or she emerges from the audience and walks to the piano. The contestant is first interviewed briefly by the M.C. (often with a discussion of the inspiration for the rag's name), then he or she is seated at the piano to play. The audience is generally tolerant and encouraging: even the most lackluster pieces receive a polite round of applause at the very least. More virtuosic compositions may elicit enthusiastic whistles or cheers. Between contestants, the M.C. entertains the audience with jokes, trivia games, and OMPA news while the judges take up to five minutes to write down their reactions to the previous contestant. After the final contestant, the judges deliberate at their table for up to ten minutes before announcing the winner. Usually, no attempt is made to explain the rationale behind the selection. The judges' decision rarely pleases everyone, and the round of applause for the winning contestant may be underscored with stifled sighs of disappointment from those in the audience whose favored contestant did not win. Following the announcement of the winner, he or she is brought back to the piano for an encore performance of the winning piece.

The panel of "new rag" judges changes every year, with most doubling as judges for the main contest on Saturday and Sunday. Judges may be accomplished performers themselves, music educators, or OMPA board members. Judges have no opportunity to

audition the contest entries in advance: they evaluate the entries *ex tempore*, assigning scores of from one (“needs improvement”) to five (“superior”) in each of the following six categories:

- Composition Form
- Melodic Flow
- Originality
- Tempo/Rhythm
- Contrast & Dynamics
- Interpretation<sup>29</sup>

It is up to the individual judges’ predilections how much to take into account a contestant’s adherence to “traditional” stylistic conventions when scoring the six components of the rubric. While many of the rules surrounding the playing Contest seem designed to restrict performances to styles and repertoire deemed “old-time,” the New Rag Contest requirements afford contestants a surprising amount of stylistic leeway.

If the categories seem at times enigmatic, no further explanation is given and judges must interpret their meanings for themselves. How exactly shall one rate “Tempo/Rhythm”? Does “Melodic Flow” suggest that entries with clearly discernible melodies moving in stepwise fashion within a limited range will trump those with less memorable or cogent melodic contours? No space is provided for explanatory written comments, though some judges elect to write personal notes to themselves or the performer in the margins or on the back of the sheet. (Each contestant’s score sheet is

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<sup>29</sup> The six categories are transcribed directly from the 2005 judges’ score sheet.

given to him or her after the contest.) The winner of the contest is determined by a simple tabulation of the numeric scores assigned by each judge. The following brief account of my own entry in the New Rag Contest may help to illustrate the judging methodology of the contest.

In 2005, I entered the New Rag Contest with a composition I called “Ticklish Tom—A Carolina Cakewalk.” Like other contestants, I had only the loose rules cited above to guide me through the creative process. (In truth, like many of the other contestants I spoke with, I composed the piece with little thought of the New Rag Contest; instead, I composed it for my own pleasure and entered it for consideration when I found that it complied with the contest guidelines.) Several months prior to the contest, I had decided to write a rag emulating the form and style of so-called “folk” rags of the late 1890s by composers such as Charles Hunter and Kerry Mills. Above a rather standard chord progression outlined with standard “oom-pah” chords in the left hand, I constructed a short, lightly syncopated, repetitive melody that drew inspiration from Mills’s “Whistling Rufus” and Arthur Marshall’s opening theme from “Swipesy—Cakewalk” (a collaboration with Scott Joplin). A contrasting B-section built upon a syncopated rhythmic riff led to a repeat of the A-section. My piece followed the early ragtime convention of modulating to the dominant for the C-section (trio), and the piece concluded with a somewhat characteristic return of the B-theme, this time in the new (dominant) key.<sup>30</sup>

In reviewing my score sheets from the judges after the contest, I was not especially surprised to see that the three judges differed considerably in their assessments. While all

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<sup>30</sup> A score of “Ticklish Tom” is included as Appendix C.

three judges awarded me high scores for “Composition Form” and “Interpretation,” my ratings in other categories like “Tempo/Rhythm” and “Contrast & Dynamics” varied, one judge awarding three points for the latter while another awarded the full five with the added written comment “good use of dynamics.” The same judge also penned the words “truly authentic sounding” (emphasis hers) on the back of the sheet, and while I never had the opportunity to ask her just what she meant by that, I suspect it was a reference to my use of chord progressions, phrase lengths, cadential figures, and melodic contours similar to the ragtime-era composers I sought to emulate. Perhaps what she heard as “authentic” is what prompted the other two judges to deduct points in the “originality” category (although I did not copy or allude to any pre-existing ragtime compositions directly).

While the contest ostensibly seeks to objectify and quantify those components seen as most prized in a ragtime composition, it is—like the weekend’s main contest—essentially a *performance* contest in which composers must impress the audience and the judges as much with their skill and showmanship at the piano as with their composition itself.

Following the conclusion of the New Rag Contest, many performers and audience members elect to remain in the room for the first of the nightly “afterglows”: loosely-structured “jam sessions” that give performers an opportunity to play without the pressures of contest setting. Not all afterglow performers are contest participants; anyone in attendance may participate. A room “host” usually sets a schedule for the first hour or two: he or she scans the room for any performers present and, with little more than a gesture and nod from across the room, signs them for sets of approximately twenty minutes,

writing their names on an easel at the front of the room. Occasionally, performers may take audience requests, but more often they use the time to show the breadth of their repertoire. Since the room features two pianos, one performer will frequently invite another to join him or her in a duet: sometimes the pianists plan their duet in advance, but in most cases, the pairing and the arrangement are spontaneous. Well-known rags like “Maple Leaf Rag,” “Black and White Rag,” “The Entertainer,” and “Dill Pickles Rag” are popular choices for afterglow duets, but it is not uncommon to hear ragged duets on themes from *Star Wars*, songs from Disney movies, 1950s rock ‘n’ roll hits, or other musical spheres not traditionally associated with ragtime.

Early in the evening the music, like the audience, is typically vigorous and lively. Many pianists respond to the din of clinking glasses and audience chatting with rousing performances that command attention (and loud applause). In the spirit of friendly competition, some pianists try to out-do each other, not only by selecting pieces that show off finger dexterity or stamina, but also by “stumping” each other and the audience with rare or unfamiliar pieces. In a gathering of ragtime enthusiasts and performers such as this, many seem to take delight in introducing an obscure rag or song that others have not heard before. (If someone returns the following year playing the same obscure rag, the previous year’s performer who “introduced” it is often credited in the same breath as the composer.)

Beer, wine, and alcoholic mixed drinks are usually available from a mini bar just outside the afterglow room. As the evening grows late and audience and performers alike fall under their libations’ spell, virtuosic showpieces usually give way to improvised 12-

bar blues that may extend for ten, fifteen, or even twenty minutes and see half-a-dozen or more pianists rotate in and out of play, taking turns at either of the two piano benches. As the mood changes from excitement and energy to gentle relaxation, many feel the pull of their beds and begin to drift away. The crowd thins as goodnights are said and the evening trundles along to an unceremonious finish sometime after midnight when the last performers and lingering audience members retire for the night.

The preliminary round of the contest proper begins at 7:30 AM Saturday morning with the mandatory contestant meeting. During the meeting, an OMPA board member reviews the rules with participating pianists, explaining the order of events and offering helpful tips along the following lines: *You have fifteen minutes of warm-up time in the practice room immediately before your performance, use it or lose it. Remember to tell the stage-hand whether you want to use the swivel stool or the bench when you sit at the piano. You will enter from stage right and cross to Ted, the M.C., who will interview you briefly before you play. Gentlemen, don't keep large wallets or keys in your pockets, it looks bad. You have exactly eight minutes from the moment you play the very first note; we've had contestants miss winning simply because they went over time. Remember to smile.* During the meeting, contestants draw numbers from a hat to determine order of play, and they also have a chance to review their contest entry forms to ensure that all information is written correctly to avoid disqualification. Contestants must write the names, composers, and composition (or publication) dates of all pieces they plan to play, and they must play them in the exact order written on the entry form. When all are satisfied that the rules have been clearly explained and there are no lingering questions,

the meeting is dismissed and contestants go to breakfast or to their hotel rooms to begin changing and preparing for the contest.



**Figure 5.3 The stage at the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest**  
(This photograph was taken shortly before my performance at the 2005 Contest.  
The judges' table is visible in the foreground.)

The contest is held in a large, brightly lit, high-ceilinged ballroom. On one end, a wide, temporary folding stage is erected some two feet above floor level. Moby Dink, the 1883 upright contest piano, is positioned slightly stage right at a roughly forty-five degree angle to the front edge of the stage, its back to the wall and its front removed so that the hammers' action is clearly visible to both the pianist and the audience. A large potted fern

behind the piano adds some color. The stage is decorated to evoke the mythical turn-of-the-century saloon. In the center of a red, patterned wallpaper backdrop is hung a painting of a woman in revealing lingerie reclining on a pouffe, her long golden curls obscuring the sensitive parts of her otherwise bare chest. (A scroll painted just above the woman's legs reads "Ragtime piano players tickle my ivories.") At the time of their performance, contestants who wish may remove hats or shawls that are part of their costume and hang them on a hat rack just to one side of the painting. At stage left is a miniature bar that serves as a podium for the master of ceremonies and just downstage from that is an easel on which large cards are placed for the duration of each contestant's performance with his or her name printed in stenciled block letters.

On the floor just in front of the stage is a long folding table where the four judges and the judging assistant sit. Beyond that are rows of banquet chairs—enough to accommodate three or four hundred spectators even if they rarely are filled to more than half capacity. The room is carpeted, and to overcome its inherent acoustic flaws and to ensure that contestants can be heard clearly, several microphones behind the piano amplify its sound through two large monitors to the front and sides of the stage. The proximity of the microphones give the already staccato-sounding piano an even brighter, "clipped" sound. The piano has not been deliberately treated in a way to achieve its unusual timbre (i.e., no lacquering or tacking the hammers), and while some contestants and audience members seem to prefer its peculiar prickly sound that enables each note struck to be heard exceedingly clearly, others lament that it is not conducive to *legato* playing and the piano's action, coupled with the electric amplification, distorts dynamic



shadings, rendering what a pianist may intend as a gossamer-like *pianissimo* as *mezzo-forte*. A piano technician is on hand to make any necessary emergency repairs and to keep the instrument in tune throughout the contest.

Shortly before 9:00, audience members pass by a table in the lobby to collect or purchase their tickets, then take their seats wherever they like, the only exception being the first two rows which are reserved for “Piano Pals,” those who have donated a certain amount to the restoration and ongoing maintenance of Moby Dink. Following a brief announcement of welcome from the master of ceremonies, the audience rises to sing the National Anthem. Then the contest begins.

As the “card girl” carries a poster-sized card bearing the contestant’s name across the stage and places it on the easel, the MC introduces the contestant. After a little banter with the M.C. (*Tell the folks a little bit about yourself. How old were you when you started playing piano? What do your friends think about all this ragtime stuff? What can you tell us about your costume?*) the contestant introduces his or her first piece, takes a seat and begins. Most of the audience sits quietly facing forward, watching and listening intently, though some knit, and others stand near the back of the room, chatting quietly. After the first piece, the contestant stands to acknowledge the applause—how they handle the audience is part of their overall score—before the M.C. asks the name of the second piece. Once it too has been played, the contestant bows or nods and walks offstage during the applause. Standing ovations are uncommon, and second bows are exceedingly rare. While the judges tally their scores and write comments on the score sheets, the M.C. tells jokes or discusses OMPA news for the five or ten minutes until the judges indicate that

they are ready to move on. The M.C. introduces the second contestant, and the cycle repeats (with a break for lunch) until all contestants have played, usually finishing in the mid-to-late afternoon.

Some contestants choose to watch the competition, but just as many are apt to “wait it out” in their hotel rooms, the dealer room, or in the hallways to avoid becoming too nervous (though many cannot resist the urge to step in when their friends are playing). Most of the contestants know each other, and often small groups of them will gather at the end of the long hallway that leads to the stage entrance to congratulate the contestant returning from his or her performance. They greet each other with hugs and warm smiles, mixed with words of praise and encouragement (even after stage fright or memory slips have resulted in substantially less-than-perfect performances). Sometimes they pause to snap pictures with pocket cameras or cell phones.

While the contest is divided into “junior” and “senior” divisions based on age, the order of contestants is mixed according to the random drawing at the pre-contest meeting. Junior and senior contestants alike perform throughout the day, and when the preliminary round is over, the junior contestants (those age eighteen or younger) are brought back to the stage for awarding of the junior certificates, medals, and first place trophy. Parents flock to the front of the stage to take photographs and the winner is invited to perform an encore piece. Meanwhile, the judges have written the names of the top ten adult contestants on slips of paper, and after the junior encore, a contest official takes the stage to draw these from a hat in dramatic fashion. The audience cheers as the ten semi-finalists are named while the contestants (most of them standing at the back of the room) cast each

other nervous glances as they wait to hear whether or not they will continue to the semi-finals.

Once the ten semi-finalists have been named, the crowd disperses, passing by the row of CD tables in the lobby where contestants with recordings for sale stand patiently behind their spreads. After dinner, many return to the ballroom for an evening group singalong and mini-concert by a featured performer followed by an afterglow party that lasts late into the night.

The next day, Sunday, begins with a late-morning OMPA board meeting to discuss the organization's finances, operation, and elect board members for the coming year. At one o'clock, the semi-finals begin in the ballroom with the top ten senior division contestants from the preliminaries returning to the stage to play an additional two selections each, following the same procedure as the previous day. The crowd on Sunday for the semi-finals and finals is usually substantially larger than on Saturday, as the audience can expect a higher level of performance.

For many contestants, selecting the pieces to play for the semi-final round poses a challenge. In their bid to reach the top ten, most choose to play up-tempo selections for the preliminary round that demonstrate finger dexterity and generate audience excitement. At the semi-finals, however, many seem mindful of the "musical variety" category on the judges' scoring sheets. Musically, the semi-final round tends to be the most varied, with the greatest mixture of slower ballads and "showpieces," as the pianists strive to prove that they are not just entertainers but *musicians*.

At the conclusion of the semi-final round, a guest performer entertains the audience while the judges retreat to tally the scores. Contestants' scores are cumulative, so preliminary round performances continue to factor significantly in the rankings at the end of the semi-finals. After twenty or thirty minutes, the judges return and once again, the names of the five advancing finalists are placed in a hat and drawn before the audience to determine order of play. The first-named contestant, upon hearing his or her name, approaches the stage and the final round commences immediately. Contestants play an additional two selections, one of which must conform to a pre-announced musical "theme" that may change from year to year. Usually, the theme is little more than a requirement to play at least one "standard." The contest's rather loose, at times enigmatic, definition of "standard" as a non-rag popular song was, for many years, a common point of contention and frustration among contestants. In 2011 the "standard" requirement in the final round was amended to require a railroad-themed piece in honor of the contest's beginnings at the Monticello Railway Museum. In 2012, the theme was changed again to require a song or rag either about or prominently featuring the name of a U.S. state.

The final round moves swiftly and typically concludes in less than an hour. At its end, a non-contestant entertainer takes the stage to engage the audience while the judges once again withdraw to total the judging sheets and select the winner. When the judges return, the top five contestants are invited to line up on stage and the final rankings, beginning with fifth place, are announced by draping medals on colored lanyards around the necks of the contestants so the winner is revealed slowly and with great suspense through elimination. The champion customarily plays an encore and takes possession of

the large traveling trophy. With the weekend's main event over, the audience files out, though after dinner, many will return for the final afterglow party. A special breakfast buffet the following morning accompanied by a hired performer (usually one of the contestants) pays tribute to the United States Armed Forces in observance of Memorial Day and serves as the final activity of the weekend. Many attendees have already left by Monday morning, but for those who linger, the breakfast provides a final opportunity to visit before saying goodbye.

#### **5.4 PARTICIPANT REACTIONS**

Since 2003, I have talked with dozens of contestants and former contestants who have competed at the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest, seeking to understand what forces brought them to the Contest, what aspects of the contest encouraged them to return, and how the Contest has influenced their own playing—both at the Contest and elsewhere.

For many of the participants I spoke with, the Contest represented their first “ragtime event.” Since the late 1990s, the Contest has maintained a strong presence on the internet; it has long had its own website, and many contestants and former contestants link to it from their own websites making it relatively easy to find. Domingo Mancuello is representative of many contestants I interviewed when he explained “I had been following the contest website since I had a computer in the home. I found it...by googling ‘ragtime.’”

“When YouTube became a thing...I watched probably every video of the contest ever posted. I still do!”<sup>31</sup> When Domingo started college, he and a friend decided to make the trip to Peoria that year to compete. “It was the first time either of us had gone to a ragtime event,” he recalls.<sup>32</sup> Adam Swanson, who has attended every Contest since 2003—and four times won first prize in the adult division—similarly recalled finding the Contest’s website online shortly after first encountering ragtime.<sup>33</sup> Others learned about the contest by word-of-mouth at other festivals. Says John Remmers: “I started attending ragtime festivals in 1996 and quickly became a frequent attendee at the Scott Joplin and West Coast festivals, among others. I heard buzz about the contest at the festivals I attended...and decided to give the contest a try.”<sup>34</sup> Still others heard about the Contest from friends or from advertisements that appeared for many years in the now-defunct *Sheet Music* magazine.<sup>35</sup>

Many of the same contestants return to the Contest year after year. When asked why they return, many replied that they appreciated the motivation the Contest provided in their efforts to learn and polish new pieces, and many cited reunion with friends as another significant draw. “It was motivation for me to improve as a player and learn new and more difficult pieces,” says Dan Mouyard, “[and] the friends I made over the years drew me back.”<sup>36</sup> Adam Swanson: “The contest instrumentally changed my life as a young person, gave me goals to reach, and most importantly, provided me with wonderful, life-

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<sup>31</sup> Domingo Mancuello, personal correspondence with the author, 9 January 2015.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Adam Swanson, personal correspondence with the author, 11 January 2015.

<sup>34</sup> John Remmers, personal correspondence with the author, 15 January 2015.

<sup>35</sup> Ethan Uslan, personal correspondence with the author, 10 January 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Dan Mouyard, personal correspondence with the author, 9 January 2015.

long friendships and good role models.”<sup>37</sup> While many other multi-day festivals can pose demanding schedules upon performers that require them to build up vast repertoires in advance to be able to fill hours of performance time, some at the Contest like John Remmers appreciated the chance to focus intently on perfecting only a few pieces: “I felt my playing benefitted from the extreme focus on a small number of pieces that preparation for the competition necessitated.”<sup>38</sup> Some noted the learning opportunity the Contest provided—the chance to see and hear more experienced contestants and learn new arranging techniques. Only a few of the contestants I spoke with ever indicated that the prospect of winning any prize money was a significant draw; most spoke of the Contest’s role in improving their own playing and the opportunity it afforded to connect with friends.

When asked why he thinks the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest is so important to the ragtime community, Bill Edwards says: “There is a definitive reason. For your \$25 or \$30 [contest entry fee] you can go in there and play for a new audience and show ‘this is what I can do.’ [For some performers,] you can audition all you want to play at West Coast or Sedalia, but you’re not ever going to do that. You’re not going to be on that stage and know that thrill...For some people, they think ‘Wow! This is what it’s like to play in front of an audience. I never want to do this again. Or ‘This feeds my soul.’”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Swanson.

<sup>38</sup> Remmers.

<sup>39</sup> Bill Edwards, interview with the author, 8 January 2015.

## 5.5 SUMMARY

The World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest began as a fundraiser for an Illinois railroad museum, designed to capitalize on the success of piano ragtime in the wake of *The Sting*. During its formative years, the Contest operated largely independent of the “ragtime community,” neither its organizers nor its participants much involved with the activities of the Ragtime Society, the Maple Leaf Club, or any other ragtime organization. While those behind the Contest have remained adamant that it is not strictly a “ragtime” contest, its format attracts a significant number of ragtime pianists and enthusiasts.



## 6.0 CONCLUSION: AUTHENTICITY AND COMMUNITY

In the article “An Introduction to Music Revival as Concept, Cultural Process, and Medium of Change,” following a brief survey of the major academic literature in the field of music revivalism, Juniper Hill and Caroline Bithell suggest that the three areas most ripe for further exploration are “the theorizing of authenticity, the documentation and explication of recontextualization processes, and, in particular, the conceptualization of post-revival.”<sup>1</sup> In situating my study of the ragtime revival within the context of the musical community it spawned and which continues to sustain it, I have considered all three to some extent. I have sought a means to convey the diversity of individual thoughts, motivations, and actions that have shaped the revival movement and helped to make ragtime what it is today, while allowing myself the space to interject my own interpretation as both a scholar and a member of the community.

When I first embarked upon this study, I had in mind several overarching questions—some of them admittedly quite personal—to which I hoped to find the answers: (1) What forces conspired to launch a ragtime revival and why? (2) How are notions of authenticity constructed, how have they changed, and how universally are they shared? (3) How did a musical revitalization movement that began decades before my

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<sup>1</sup> Juniper Hill and Caroline Bithell, “An Introduction to Music Revival as Concept, Cultural Process, and Medium of Change,” in *Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*, ed. Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9.

birth come to have such a profound effect on my own sense of identity in the present? It is perhaps this last question that has provided the strongest motivation; much like the genealogist who seeks self-discovery through a survey of his ancestral past, I found myself drawn increasingly to a study of the mechanisms by which several generations of “cultural ancestors” have cultivated and nurtured an interconnected web of ragtime enthusiasts who share a musical affinity—and much more besides.

If at times I have indulged a desire to chronicle the ragtime revival’s activities at the expense of deeper contextualization within a broader historical socio-economic narrative, it is because I have endeavored to establish a more detailed history of the revival movement that may provide a solid foundation for my own and others’ future research in this fascinating and vibrant corner of America’s vast and varied musical landscape. When I began, I was surprised and dismayed to see that in even the most detailed and meticulously-researched books on ragtime, 40- and 50-year institutions of the revival movement—festivals, publications, and societies—are routinely dismissed with cursory summaries of at most a few sentences that trivialize their role in shaping the music’s ongoing development and underestimate their importance in the formation of a very real community that contributes mightily to its members’ sense of identity. Only by first piecing together the stories of these prominent institutions can a better picture of the movement as a whole begin to emerge and its ramifications be better understood.

One of the greatest challenges in discussing the intentions, motivations, or objectives of “*the ragtime revival community*” is that often such things are as diverse as the individuals who make up the community. Chris Goertzen, in writing of the Norwegian

fiddle revival, is able to speak in terms of a government-sponsored “National Fiddlers’ Association,”<sup>2</sup> a century-old organization now affiliated with *Folkemusikk* magazine under the auspices of the Norwegian Cultural Council<sup>3</sup> and boasting more than five thousand members.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Tamara Livingston has indicated that the success of the Brazilian *choro* revival in the 1970s and early 1980s had much to do with government support.<sup>5</sup> Many other folk musics and lasting musical revival movements likewise have some “official” organization (whether government-sanctioned or not) which serves as the movement’s mouthpiece, authority on “authenticity,” and arbiter of community boundaries (where revival communities can be said to exist). In those cases, such organizations provide convenient focal points around which to center discussions of authenticity and culture politics. In the absence of any lasting “official” national ragtime organization, when enthusiasts have endeavored to form such organizations themselves, they have generally done so with considerable acknowledgement of the variety of opinion and expression that exists within the revival community. As vocal as certain ragtime exponents have been in espousing their beliefs about ragtime and authenticity, they speak only for themselves. As I have shown, while *The RagTime Review*, the Ragtime Society, the Maple Leaf Club, the Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival, and the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest at times betray the prejudices, attitudes, and motivations of their founders, none can lay claim to representation of the ragtime

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<sup>2</sup> Chris Goertzen, *Fiddling for Norway* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Folkemusikk. “Magasinet for folkemusikk og folkedans.” Accessed 6 April 2016.  
<http://www.folkemusikk.no>.

<sup>4</sup> David Golber, “What You Should Know About the Hardanger Fiddle,” *American Lutherie* 36 (Winter 1993): 26.

<sup>5</sup> Tamara Livingston, “Revivals as Cosmopolitan Participatory Music Making,” in *Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*, 66.

community as a whole. Nevertheless, viewed collectively, they offer a glimpse into broad notions of authenticity that bind the community together.

While I have tended to focus on those aspects of the ragtime revival community that serve to unite its members in a sense of common purpose and shared musical “culture,” Anthony Cohen reminds us that the essence of a community lies in its ability to establish boundaries that distinguish it from others.<sup>6</sup> A community based on kinship is all the more potent for its exclusion of those who are *not* family, just as a community based on close geographic proximity is only meaningful when confronted with “outsiders.” One of the challenges in trying to define the ragtime community is that its members, while embracing many shared musical and social values, seldom position these unifying values in opposition to a dissimilar “other” or even the cultural mainstream. There is little sense within the community that by embracing the aesthetics of ragtime music or entering the community one is forsaking all others. At the same time, the ragtime community is far from a demographically or ideologically homogenous group, and it is not possible to delimit its membership based on age, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, political affiliation, nationality, or location.

When he suggests that many artistic revival movements stem from a collective nostalgia—a yearning for “a time when life was simpler and presumably better,” Chris Goertzen hints that oftentimes, revival movements and communities position themselves in opposition to modern society and mainstream culture.<sup>7</sup> It is true that many ragtime enthusiasts at festivals—performers and audience members alike—may be overheard to

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<sup>6</sup> Anthony P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (Chichester: Ellis Horwood Ltd., 1985), 40.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Goertzen, *Fiddling for Norway* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 11.

make disparaging remarks about modern society and culture (ranging from “distasteful” or “insipid” popular music to “ridiculous” fashion to complaints about ubiquitous computer technologies interrupting and replacing person-to-person contact), but dissatisfaction with the cultural mainstream is by no means requisite among ragtime community members. Indeed, many of them openly celebrate such things. Most members of the ragtime community today acknowledge that the political, social, and economic climate endured by many performers and composers of the ragtime era was far from ideal. Thus, unlike the old-time revival community studied by Amy Wooley, there is little effort among ragtime enthusiasts to restore historical extra-musical components of ragtime “culture.”<sup>8</sup>

In lieu of overtly tangible, physical, structural, or even ideological boundaries that would demarcate ragtime community insiders from all others, I suggest that the ragtime community identifies itself through the loosely imagined symbolic boundary of “authenticity,” but even that is fraught with complications and caveats. Part of the difficulty in discussing authenticity among ragtime revivalists is that what constitutes the “authentic” has changed over the course of the revival movement and still varies widely from one enthusiast to the next according to each individual’s specific interests and motivations. Still, I argue that the revival has witnessed a shift from product- and person-oriented criteria for establishing authenticity to more process-oriented criteria, and that widely shared notions about authenticity—even if seldom discussed or acknowledged—constitute the primary tie that binds the ragtime community.

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<sup>8</sup> Wooley writes that “[t]he old-time community is based on a shared love of its adopted musical tradition, and also a reverence for the ethos of the parent tradition.” See Amy Wooley, “Conjuring Utopia: The Appalachian String Band Revival” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2003), x.

## 6.1 CRITERIA FOR AUTHENTICITY

“Authenticity” is a powerful and complex symbol because while all ragtime community members have some concept of it, individual interpretations of what constitutes the “authentic” vary widely. Whether overtly acknowledged or not, “authenticity” serves in the ragtime revival community—as it does in most musical revival communities—as a metric for determining authority and legitimacy. To call something “authentic” is to assert that it is genuine, true, and trustworthy and thus deserving of obedience and respect.<sup>9</sup> Many ragtime performers and composers of the revival era see themselves as part of an ongoing musical culture and tradition that reaches back to the time of Scott Joplin and his contemporaries, and establishing a sense of continuity and “trustworthiness” within that tradition is important to building credibility and acceptance. At the small scale, a composer’s ability to project authenticity in his or her compositions can mean the wider adoption of those works by performers who may feature them on recordings or in performance. Similarly, for performers, a sense of authenticity can be crucial to connecting with audiences and securing paid performance opportunities, including invitations to various ragtime festivals and events. On a larger scale, festival and concert organizers must be able to convey a sense that the music they present is authentic when seeking to attract audiences, donations, or arts grants on which they rely. Building upon the work of Hans Weisethaunet, Ulf Lindberg, and John Fornäs, who portray authenticity as a function of “how...textual structures are constructed to present themselves as related

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<sup>9</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Authentic,” accessed 22 October 2015, <http://www.oed.com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/13314?rskey=owaWhz&result=1#eid>.

to the subjects that created them,”<sup>10</sup> Hill and Bithell identify three categories of criteria by which music revivalists may determine authenticity: product-oriented, person-oriented, and process-oriented.<sup>11</sup>

Product-oriented criteria include physical manifestations of a music tradition. Hill and Bithell specifically cite texts (which can include notated music as well as sound recordings) and “sound product” (which includes timbre and articulation) as forming the basis for product-oriented assessments of authenticity, to which I would submit that designed context also belongs. Hill and Bithell would likely disagree, assigning context—as a subset of “authenticity of experience”—to the realm of process-oriented criteria; but by “designed context,” I am more concerned with the deliberate efforts of performers and producers to find or create a physical space conducive to an authentic experience. (Whether it does, in fact, lead to “authenticity of experience” is another matter!) Measured by product-oriented criteria, a performer whose repertoire consists primarily of rags published during the ragtime era and whose performances (in terms of style, tempo, articulation, ornamentation, etc.) closely resemble period recordings of venerated ragtime-era musicians might be considered “authentic.” This authenticity is further enhanced when a performance takes place in an appropriate venue with a period instrument. (E.g., a pianist who plays ragtime on a 1905 Weber upright in a smaller space such as a restaurant, bar, or home parlor will likely evoke greater “authenticity” than the one who plays a Roland digital keyboard in a large gallery of modern art.) In this case, the piano—

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<sup>10</sup> Hans Weisethaunet and Ulf Lindberg, “Authenticity Revisited: The Rock Critic and the Changing Real,” *Popular Music and Society* 33 (2010): 465.

<sup>11</sup> Hill and Bithell, 20.

itself a physical *product* of the ragtime era—imparts a sense of authenticity that is not strictly *process-oriented*.

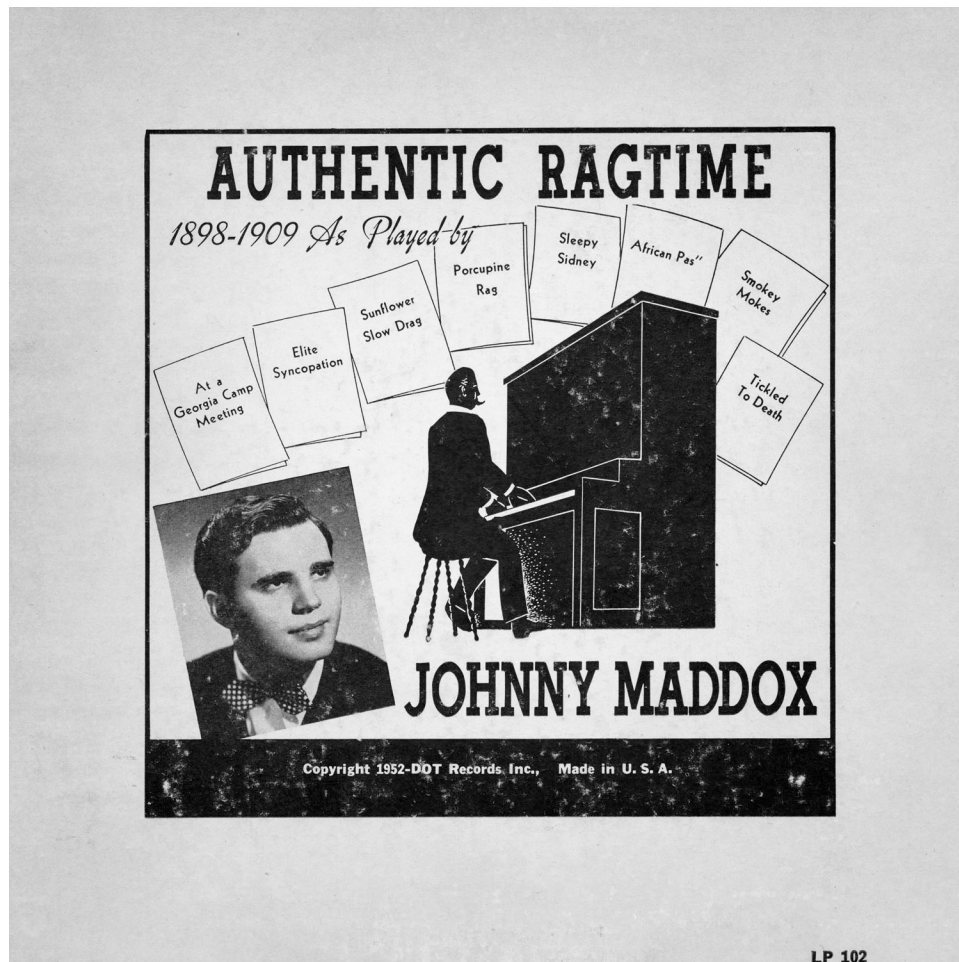


Figure 6.1 *Authentic Ragtime* by Johnny Maddox (1952)



Somewhat like product-oriented criteria, according to person-oriented criteria, power and authority are vested in individuals or groups regarded as representing a music tradition's original "source"—including performers, composers, and those close to them. Special emphasis is usually given to those seen to represent a music tradition's "purest" form, which Hill and Bithell note in some cases leads to the problematic assignment of authenticity based on ethnicity and a "blood-and-soil variety of nationalism."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, early in the ragtime revival it was common for critics, historians, and other authors to seek legitimacy and authenticity in ragtime along racial lines. As I have shown, Brun Campbell—a white man and one of ragtime's foremost exponents in the 1940s—was especially concerned with acknowledging the race of the ragtime-era composers he discussed, the implication always being that "Negro" composers were the "most important" and thus most "authentic."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the unsigned liner notes to Johnny Maddox's debut LP, *Authentic Ragtime* (Dot LP 102, 1952, see Figure 6.01), portray authentic ragtime as "the life expression of a human race—the American Negro," adding that "[t]rue ragtime, though it had its beginnings in the beat of jungle drums and the strumming of plantation banjo strings, is essentially a piano music *and* difficult, especially difficult for white fingers, definitely enticing to white ears."<sup>14</sup> The LP's cover and liner

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> See Brun Campbell, "Ragtime (Silk Stockings, Short Skirts, Silk Blouses, and Velvet Jackets)," *Jazz Journal* 2, April 1949, 9-10. Arguments for the authenticity of ragtime made by "Negroes" can be traced to the ragtime era itself; an article titled "In Defense of Ragtime" appearing in *The Outlook* of 24 May 1913 (n.p.) comments that ragtime "originated in the improvisations of Negro piano-players in dance resorts about St. Louis and Memphis; that white men wrote it down, adapted it, published it, and made money out of it, but that it was really created by Negroes."

<sup>14</sup> Anonymous, liner notes to the LP Johnny Maddox, *Authentic Ragtime* (Gallatin, TN: Dot Records, 1952, LP 102).

notes further suggest that “authentic” ragtime is a bounded repertoire that includes the compositions contained within the record.

Following the “re-discovery” of Joseph Lamb (who was white) in the 1950s and his installation as one of ragtime’s “Big Three,” ragtime revivalists came to see him (and Brun Campbell as well) as authentic carriers of the tradition. As the ragtime community witnessed subsequent waves of focused interest and research (e.g. women ragtime composers of the ragtime era, most of whom were white) broader conceptions of ragtime’s history have meant that notions of race and ethnicity have contributed less and less to person-oriented valuations of authenticity. Nevertheless, those in the ragtime community have continued to hold certain composers and performers of the ragtime era and the early revival era in such universal high esteem that they would seem able still to confer power and authority; and revival-era performers and composers continue to seek association with them as a means of projecting authenticity. In some cases, revivalists document and publicize direct contact they may have had with notable ragtime figures (such as Brun Campbell in the 1940s, who sought legitimacy by touting himself widely as “Scott Joplin’s pupil,”<sup>15</sup> and Terry Waldo in the 1970s, who reminded audiences that he was Eubie Blake’s “protégé”<sup>16</sup>); in other cases, composers may invoke the names of celebrated ragtime figures in the titles of newly-composed works (e.g., “The Newbie Eubie” by Martin Spitznagel in honor of Blake).

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<sup>15</sup> David A. Jasen, *Ragtime: An Encyclopedia, Discography, and Sheetography* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 33.

<sup>16</sup> Terry Waldo, *This Is Ragtime* (New York: Hawthorne, 1976). Waldo’s biographical sketch on the book’s dust jacket notes that “Today, Waldo is a close friend and protégé [sic] of Eubie Blake, who has said of him, ‘Terry Waldo is a very fine musician and entertainer. The rags he composed and played for me are very, very good. I call him ‘my ofay son.’”

Process-oriented criteria involve methods by which revivalists engage with the music, including transmission, creation, and reception. Hill and Bithell suggest that many music revivals—especially of “folk” and popular music traditions—have favored the direct transmission from guru to apprentice, often viewing oral transmission and close, personal contact as more valid and authentic than learning from books or institutions.<sup>17</sup> Citing Weisethaunet and Lindberg, Hill and Bithell also note an increased valuation of personal expression since the mid-twentieth century, something they attribute to the rise of rock ‘n’ roll, and they contend that the expression of deeply felt emotions is often a process-oriented marker of authenticity.<sup>18</sup> In a similar vein, among certain revival movements, a degree of creativity and innovation may itself be “just as traditional and authentic as faithful replications of historical pieces.”<sup>19</sup> Burt Feintuch writes that in such cases, “it works better to think of *tradition* as a territory of the imagination rather than as a standard for some notion of authenticity.”<sup>20</sup> So long as the recognizable “core” of the tradition exists, processes of change and innovation may be seen as integral to upholding its authentic “spirit.” Finally, in casting his attention upon the audience rather than the artist, Owe Ronström argues that in some process-oriented criteria, “[t]he authentic is the experience, the taste, or the emotion. What is true is what feels true.”<sup>21</sup> Because audiences’ (or, in Ronström’s word, “consumers’”) expectations may be ill-informed or

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Burt Feintuch, “Revivals on the Edge: Northumberland and Cape Breton—A Keynote,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 38 (2006): 9.

<sup>21</sup> Owe Ronström, “Traditional Music, Heritage Music,” in *Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*, 47.

differ significantly from those of performers, Ronström refers to this as “the authenticity of the consumer.”<sup>22</sup>

## 6.2 AUTHENTICITY AND THE RAGTIME COMMUNITY

Authenticity as a topic for open debate has become less prominent within the ragtime community since the Joplin “boom” of the early 1970s, coinciding with a subtle shift from product- and person-oriented criteria to more process-oriented criteria.

Those most active in the early years of the ragtime revival, from the 1940s through the 1960s, seem to have been especially keen to establish authenticity according to product-oriented criteria, particularly in the areas of repertoire and performance style. As an outgrowth of a “traditional jazz” revival movement championed largely by record collectors and critics, many early ragtime revivalists inherited a sense of reverence for the recordings and documents (e.g., sheet music and piano rolls) that preserved the repertoire and something of the typical period performance styles of their chosen music. With few informants from the parent tradition active or accessible, many early ragtime revivalists relied on recordings, sheet music, and piano rolls as carriers of the musical tradition. Such fixed documents offered relatively little room for dialogue with the parent tradition; essentially they provided transmission in one direction only. Early revivalists could collect and categorize them, accepting or rejecting them as “authentic” based on their own

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

criteria, but prior to community organization and a more performance-based revival, revivalist-collectors had few opportunities to *engage* with the music as a creative process. Jazz revivalists had sometimes found it difficult to articulate those aspects of the processes of “making jazz” they found appealing or especially meaningful, and thus it was often more effective to hold up a recording and hail *it*—the product—as an expression of the “authentic,” as witnessed by the comments of Hugues Panassié<sup>23</sup> and those of Charles Edward Smith, et al.<sup>24</sup> The tools of the traditional jazz revivalists—catalogues, discographies, and other lists—were readily adopted as the tools of the early ragtime revivalists too, and rags that appeared in the “right” publishers’ catalogues (such as that of John Stark), or were published within the “right” time frame (1895-1915), or that figured in the “right” collector-oriented lists or discographies (such as those in the back of *They All Played Ragtime*) were quick to be considered authentic.

Of course, repertoire alone was no automatic indicator of “authentic” ragtime, as George W. Kay pointed out in a 1950 article titled “Ragged But Right.”<sup>25</sup> A performance had to match what was specified in the texts. Even before the nascent “honky-tonk” movement drew the ire of many “classic” rag enthusiasts, Kay complained about the inauthentic treatment of “classic” rags in the hands of traditional jazz bands. While he cited the recordings of Scott Joplin’s rags by such well-respected groups as Lu Watters’ Yerba Buena Jazz Band and Tony Parenti’s Ragtimers as “fine experiments,” he cautioned

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<sup>23</sup> Hugues Panassié, *Le Jazz Hot* (Paris: Éditions R.-A. Corrêa, 1934), 22. Panassié makes reference to the ability of records to capture jazz in its “definitive form.”

<sup>24</sup> Charles Edward Smith et al., *The Jazz Record Book* (New York: Smith & Durrell, 1942), vii. The four authors of the *Jazz Record Book* write that “[e]mphasis...must be on records as a transcribed history of jazz itself.”

<sup>25</sup> George W. Kay, “Ragged But Right,” *The Record Changer*, March 1950, 5.

that “few of their efforts can be considered authentic.”<sup>26</sup> Ostensibly, Kay was concerned with textual authority; his examination of original sheet music, in which he observed the intricacies of Joplin’s original texts along with Joplin’s own admonition not to play his pieces fast, let him to conclude that a “correct” or “authentic” performance—“as the composer intended”—was one played by a solo pianist who adhered closely to the score. Even as Kay assigns primacy to product-oriented criteria (the authority of Joplin’s scores) in his discussion of authenticity, he makes mention of person-oriented criteria as well when he cites Brun Campbell and Roy Carew as perhaps the two most authentic interpreters of Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag.” In Kay’s description, the “correctness” or authenticity of their performances would seem to owe more to their ragtime pedigree (Campbell as a student of Joplin, and Carew as a student of Jelly Roll Morton and Tony Jackson) than to a rigid adherence to the published scores. I am not aware of the existence of any recording of “Maple Leaf Rag” played by Roy Carew, but several recordings survive to document Brun Campbell’s approach to the rag.<sup>27</sup> In addition to playing with a subtle rhythmic “swing” not notated in Joplin’s score (Campbell in many cases treats passages of successive eighth notes more as if they were alternating dotted eights and sixteenths), Campbell interjects—deliberately, it would seem—several chords and harmonies uncharacteristic of Joplin, as well as an extra beat at the end of the rag’s A-section. Despite Campbell’s frequent claim that he played the rag exactly as Joplin taught it to him (see Figure 2.01, p. 77), the idiosyncracies of his recorded performances strongly suggest otherwise. Nevertheless, despite his deviations from the published score, Campbell’s own stature in the 1940s as an

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Brun Campbell’s recording of “Maple Leaf Rag” as illustrated in Figure 2.01 (p. 77) may be heard on the CD *Essays in Ragtime: The Music of Brun Campbell* (Rivermont BSW-2236).

elder statesman of ragtime (a reputation largely of his own construction) ensured that Kay and many others considered his performances authentic.

For some ragtime enthusiasts, the onslaught of “honky-tonk” ragtime in the 1950s threatened efforts to promote “classic” ragtime. Many, like Paul Affeldt, found the musical aesthetics of the honky-tonk movement unpleasant and its predilections for hokum not only offensive, but injurious to the cause of “real” ragtime.<sup>28</sup> “This music [classic ragtime] is not...Honky Tonk, or Ricky-Tick,” wrote John Fisher forcefully in his letter announcing the formation of the Ragtime Society in Toronto, “Many people have heard some Ragtime and have then tried to buy sheet music, records, or player piano rolls. The music is essentially non-existent, the records often ricky-tick, and the piano rolls terrible jazz arrangements of Ragtime tunes.”<sup>29</sup> While the honky-tonk movement ironically professed its own degree of “authenticity” (through the use of purposefully de-tuned pianos and “expert” musicians—never mind the pseudonyms), ragtime revivalists turned ever more to product-oriented criteria for establishing the authenticity of “classic” ragtime. Since “honky tonk” pianists seldom recorded instrumental piano rags, but rather appealed to buyers with piano-driven instrumental adaptations of more well-remembered pop songs of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (often with a handful of public domain “classical” melodies thrown in), “classic” ragtime’s distinct repertoire provided a convenient metric for distinguishing and distancing “real” ragtime from its illegitimate cousin. An anecdote recounted by ragtime revivalist Bob McGrath in 1964 of a meeting with ragtime era veteran Joe Jordan speaks not only to the degree to which some “real”

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Affeldt, *Jazz Report*, January 1961. Reprinted in *The Rag Times*, January 1982, 2.

<sup>29</sup> John A. Fisher, letter announcing the Ragtime Society, January 1962.

ragtimers (Jordan) looked down upon pop songs as “inauthentic” ragtime, but also to the esteem in which ragtime revivalists held parent tradition “informants” whose opinions merited inclusion among person-oriented criteria for authenticity:

After we introduced ourselves, Joe [Jordan] said he was curious to know what he could do for me. I said I wanted to learn to play ragtime. He had me sit down at the piano and play what I thought was ragtime...About the only thing I could play in a fast sort of honky-tonk style was “Yes Sir, That’s My Baby.” I could see the disappointment on Joe’s face, but he was very gracious; he played some of his compositions, and gave me an autographed copy of “That Teasin [sic] Rag” and some pointers on playing it.<sup>30</sup>

Ragtime enthusiasts banded together with the help of publications like *The RagTime Review*, *The Ragtimer*, and *The Rag Times* to facilitate the distribution of “authentic” ragtime sheet music and recordings when the more commercially-minded outlets offered only “hokum sold under the guise of ragtime.”<sup>31</sup>

A shift from “product-oriented” to “process-oriented” criteria for establishing authenticity in the ragtime community has come, I argue, from the demise of the most prominent ragtime clubs and societies, coupled with the rise and longevity of ragtime festivals and contests and a shift in the ragtime revival’s core community from revivalist-collectors to revivalist-performers and revivalist-composers. In addition, there is a growing acceptance of the normalcy of revival—a concept commented upon by Margaret E. Walker in her discussion of Indian *kathak* dance in which revivalists accept reconstruction “as an ‘authentic’ part of traditional performance practice.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> “Performer Profile,” *Ragtime Society Newsletter*, September 1964, 60.

<sup>31</sup> “Warner Bros. Confused,” *The Rag Times*, September 1973, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Margaret E. Walker, “National Purity and Postcolonial Hybridity in India’s *Kathak* Dance Revival,” in *Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*, 206.



As the products of revivalist-collectors, publications such as *The RagTime Review*, *The Ragtimer*, and *The Rag Times* (and the organizations responsible for the latter two: the Ragtime Society and the Maple Leaf Club, respectively) perpetuated the notion of ragtime as something to be quantified, collected, analyzed, and then disseminated. Both *The RagTime Review* and *The Ragtimer* listed among their primary objectives the production and distribution of ragtime sheet music reprints—an effort to make authoritative texts available to members. To this, the Ragtime Society added a series of LP recordings by performers they deemed authoritative. In the absence of any more formal national associations or foundations dedicated to ragtime, these enthusiast-run groups and their publications became the *de facto* authorities of the young revival. As curators of a vast, sprawling, often ill-defined musical “tradition,” the priority they gave to particular pieces, composers, and performers helped to establish them as “authentic.”

As I have noted, organizers and participants in events that brought ragtime enthusiasts together in the 1960s and early 1970s—festivals as well as club meetings—often sought a space in which they could create an ambiance or atmosphere that they felt was conducive to “authentic” performance and experience of the music. By choosing to hold events such as the St. Louis Ragtime Festival aboard the historic Goldenrod Showboat or meetings of Los Angeles’s Maple Leaf Club in “Gay ‘90s”-themed restaurants, organizers sought to tie musical performance to a physical space evocative of the ragtime era. Participants often responded in kind, attending and performing in costumes that recalled the fashions (or the *imagined* fashions) of ragtime’s heyday. Even when nostalgia-themed venues and performers’ costumes themselves held no claims to historical accuracy

or period “authenticity,” the *experience* they offered was a legitimizing force in its own right—the “appropriate” setting and attire for ragtime. Such venues and modes of dress emphasized the music’s historical connotations and connections in a physical way—casting it as a product of a specific time removed from the present—while reinforcing a sense of bounded “togetherness” and “distinctiveness” among those present separate from the “outside world.”

The nationwide Joplin revival of the early 1970s and the subsequent rise of new events such as the Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival precipitated a re-contextualization of performance space. The film *The Sting* anachronistically cast ragtime as background music to 1930s Chicago, and widely-circulated recordings by Joshua Rifkin and the New England Conservatory Ragtime Ensemble further divorced ragtime from its historical trappings with presentations and performance styles that sought to emphasize its “timeless” appeal—an effect made even more potent by their frequent broadcast on classical and “Top 40” radio stations alike. Ragtime’s new respectability saw it welcomed into venues that included music conservatories, concert halls, and churches alongside other established western art musics. As ragtime became increasingly stripped of its historical connotations, those in the ragtime community came to seek legitimacy and authenticity in the music itself as a vehicle for personal expression.

If one traces the beginning of the ragtime revival to about the year 1940, then 2015 marks the movement’s seventy-fifth year—an unusually long time for a musical revival, and a span nearly four times as long as the ragtime era itself. Peter Lundberg, Fred Hoepfner, Robert Bradford, and others I spoke with who trace their involvement in the

ragtime community to the 1960s or earlier have commented how “fresh” and novel most ragtime-era compositions were in the revival’s early years, at a time when much of what would become the revival’s core repertoire was as yet largely untapped. As the number of “classic” ragtime recordings has steadily increased, and as the advent of ragtime club get-togethers and annual festivals has increased exposure to once rarely heard rags, a number of people within the community (performers and non-performers alike) have admitted to me that they sometimes tire of playing and hearing the “same old” rags. Consequently, to stave off boredom, ragtime performers since the 1960s have increasingly added newly-composed rags to their repertoires as well as musical works that may be related to ragtime historically or stylistically (particularly in their use of syncopation), but which otherwise fall well outside most conventional definitions of ragtime (such as non-syncopated “parlor” piano music of the ragtime era, early jazz compositions, works by Latin American composers, and virtuosic “concert” arrangements of later popular songs). Not surprisingly, notions of authenticity have shifted somewhat to accommodate such musical new arrivals, especially among newer converts, many of whom enter a ragtime community already accustomed to an increasingly wide array of repertoires and performance styles. Thus, distinctions of what is or is not ragtime—or what is or is not “authentic”—have come to be drawn less along such product-oriented criteria as repertoire or even performance style.

Besides encouraging broader repertoires, ragtime festivals and contests (including, but not limited to, the two I have discussed) encourage performers to develop unique, personal performance styles. For a pianist to be successful at the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest, he or she must be able to make a memorable impression

on the judges, and as judging categories like “interpretation” and “originality” attest (see Fig. 5.02, p. 244), the strong projection of a personally-identifiable style is highly favored. Similarly, at ragtime festivals such as the Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival, among as many as three-dozen other pianists, performers must distinguish themselves if they are to attract audiences for their sets. Jim Kinnear’s 1962 comment that Trebor Tichenor played in “Sedalia Style” seems designed to legitimize Tichenor’s playing according to product-oriented criteria of authenticity by relating it to the styles of Sedalia-area ragtime pianists—presumably of the ragtime era.<sup>33</sup> While ragtime pianists in 2015 may still be occasionally likened stylistically to notable pianists of the earlier ragtime revival era or even the ragtime era itself, more prized is the sense that a pianist plays in a style that is identifiably his or her own.

My findings support Hill and Bithell’s claim that notions of authenticity in musical revivals have—since the late twentieth century—come to be predicated largely upon the truthfulness and intensity of revival musicians’ emotional self-expression. When Mimi Blais, a pianist widely respected in the ragtime community, proclaims “Ragtime is Freedom!” in the biographical sketch that accompanies her photo in many ragtime festival brochures, she is speaking to the music’s flexibility and viability as a means for self-expression. When I asked her if she could expand upon her statement, she explained that as a classically-trained musician<sup>34</sup>—an artist trained, ostensibly, to replicate and convey the musical thoughts of others—her reaction upon first encountering ragtime in 1990 was that she had discovered a musical style in which “[y]ou have the right to change some

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<sup>33</sup> Jim Kinnear, “Special Events,” *The Ragtimer*, August 1962, 5.

<sup>34</sup> Mimi Blais graduated with a degree in piano performance from McGill University in 1984.

notes without feeling guilty, you can become a composer, an arranger... you can be free to be yourself."<sup>35</sup> Like many in the ragtime community, Blais is cognizant of ragtime's history, and she is quick to liken the freedom she feels when playing ragtime to the freedom she imagines composers Scott Joplin, Arthur Marshall, Tom Turpin, and other African-Americans to have felt when composing and performing ragtime a century ago. "Don't be shy to show your feelings, your imagination, your soul," she adds, "Ragtime music will help you to discover your inner self."<sup>36</sup> I do not mean to suggest that members of the ragtime community actively reject attempts by performers to model their performance styles on pianists of the early revival era or the ragtime era itself, but Blais's comments are indicative of the ways in which many ragtime enthusiasts have come to see their role as gatekeepers of the tradition.

In 2011, I passed out a written survey to 23 attendees at the Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival and 24 attendees at the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest. In both cases, respondents included ragtime performers as well as non-playing listeners. When asked to define "ragtime" in their own words, a few chose to situate it within an historical context: "Ragtime is a style of music, unique in its 'ragged' or syncopated rhythm in the melody. This musical genre originated in African-American music of the 19th century," and "Late 1800 and early 1900 music sensation associated with the counter cultures of black musicians, prohibition and the entertainment world of that era." Many, however, discussed it primarily in terms of how it made them *feel*. "A joyous music that lifts my spirits—whether I'm listening or playing," wrote one. "A mostly

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<sup>35</sup> Mimi Blais, correspondence with the author, 22 October 2015.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

happy music—the syncopation sets my feet tapping,” wrote another. Other responses include: “Incredibly happy, toe-tapping music. I can’t be depressed playing or listening to ragtime,” and “To me its music that makes me tap my toes and smile.” When asked to explain why they liked the performers they did, most spoke to the ability of performers to “move” them emotionally.

The longevity of the ragtime revival has indicated to many its success. As those in the revival community have come once again to see ragtime music as a thriving, vibrant, active tradition—a tradition secure in its community—and no longer something to be “saved” and “restored” from the receding past, notions of what constitute the most “authentic” treatment of the music have come to center on the *processes* of creating music that retains the essential element of syncopation while reflecting the “authentic self” of its composer or performer. In 2015, I believe it is fair to say that most, if not all, ragtime enthusiasts are drawn to the music for primarily aesthetic reasons: they like the way it sounds and they like the way it feels to play. In the words of Tom Shea: “When the music stops in the Bustle and Bowes and the foot stompin’ and yellin’ starts, you know that here is music that can stand on its own merits when it is presented with understanding and honesty.”<sup>37</sup> It is telling, I think, that those in the ragtime community no longer speak explicitly about “authenticity” or the “authentic,” but rather, as Max Morath does, in terms of “the spirit of rag.”<sup>38</sup> So long as “spirit” connotes that which is both essential and eternal, the community will certainly have secured for itself the ragtime life.

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<sup>37</sup> Tom Shea, *The Ragtimer*, October 1964, 67.

<sup>38</sup> “The Spirit of Rag,” *The Ragtimer*, March 1965, 11-12.

## APPENDIX A

### RAGTIME FESTIVALS ATTENDED BY THE AUTHOR (2003-2015)

**Table A-1 Ragtime festivals attended by the author (2003-2015)**

Festival	Location	Years Attended
World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest	Peoria, Illinois	2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2011
Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival	Sedalia, Missouri	2006*, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015
"Blind" Boone Ragtime and Early Jazz Festival	Columbia, Missouri	2006*, 2012*, 2013
Oklahoma Centennial Ragtime Festival**	Tulsa, Oklahoma	2007
San Antonio Ragtime Festival	San Antonio, Texas	2009
Central Pennsylvania Ragtime Festival	Rockhill Furnace, Pennsylvania	2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015
West Coast Ragtime Festival	Sacramento, California	2012
Buenos Aires Ragtime Festival	Buenos Aires, Argentina	2014, 2015

\* I attended these festivals only as an audience member, not as a performer.

\*\* This was a special one-time only festival; it is not an annual event.

## APPENDIX B

### ***THEY ALL PLAYED RAGTIME* PRESENTATION RECORD (1950)**



**Figure B-1** *They All Played Ragtime* Presentation Record (1950)

This 10-inch 78 rpm record was presented to radio stations across the United States in late 1950 to promote the book *The All Played Ragtime* by Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950).

Label states: *The authors, Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, discuss Ragtime with Herbert Weinstock, editor, of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., publisher of "They All Played Ragtime"*

*Transcription from 78 rpm record by Bryan S. Wright*

**Weinstock:** Here with me are the two writers of what appears to be the first book about ragtime ever published. They are Rudi Blesh, known for his books on jazz, and Harriet



Janis, heretofore a writer on art. Both have spent many years recording jazz and ragtime. Mrs. Janis, how did you people get the idea of writing this book?

**Janis:** While recording all over the country, we met many old ragtime players and composers and heard their life stories. We found that ragtime is being played everywhere, and people still love it. Although it's seldom called ragtime now, it is as charming and melodious as ever. Yet, no one has ever stopped to tell the story of ragtime, the music that introduced syncopation into the American scene. We thought the story should be told.

**Weinstock:** What sort of story is it, Mr. Blesh?

**Blesh:** *They All Played Ragtime* is a very human story of the lives of those Americans who first created syncopated music. It is a story of the 1890s and of the early 1900s; of the black-faced minstrel shows, of the early burlesques, of the cakewalk craze, and of the ragtime pianos that were heard in towns at cafes and theaters and in thousands of homes. It is a story of the great World's Fairs in Chicago and St. Louis, and all the exciting things that happened at a time that is now a very romantic period for us all.

**Weinstock:** What eventually happened to ragtime?

**Janis:** Jazz came in in 1917 at the time of World War I. It was the new name jazz that stuck, and everyone forgot the name ragtime.

**Blesh:** The funny thing is that so many of the old songs that are now being revived are actually old ragtime songs. Why, even the "Third Man Theme" that everybody is now humming is actually an old rag that somehow or other landed in Vienna about 1910.

**Weinstock:** Well not many people have realized that, I'm sure.

**Blesh:** No, in fact the entire ragtime story is a brand-new story. There is the player piano, predecessor of the phonograph—there's a story. The way that ragtime helped to build up the huge music business, or Tin Pan Alley. There are the dozens of great ragtime composers whose music is still popular, but whose colorful, adventurous lives—even their names—are scarcely remembered today.

**Weinstock:** Where did these men and their music come from?

**Janis:** The ragtimers of the old school came mostly from the Midwestern states: Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, and especially Missouri. Sedalia, Missouri, an old frontier railroad center was the cradle of ragtime in the 1890s. Then St. Louis became the ragtime capitol when all the great players gathered there. Ragtime piano accompanied a whole generation of dancers in cabarets and dance halls. It was the entertainment music for shows and bars, honky-tonk, and it was background music for the movies before sound came in. This was all before the jazz and swing bands took over.

**Weinstock:** Mr. Blesh, you mentioned the player piano a few minutes ago, I believe. Wasn't the record we're going to play recorded from an old player piano roll?

**Blesh:** That's right, as a matter of fact, the roll was made around 1908, and it reproduces Scott Joplin's actual playing of his own "Maple Leaf Rag," which was a masterpiece of ragtime, and its greatest all-time hit. Uh, Joplin and the other leading ragtime composers, you know, uh, never had the opportunity of making phonograph records because the very primitive recording of those early days couldn't reproduce the tones of the piano.

**Weinstock:** Uh, Mrs. Janis, how did you get the music from the roll onto a modern, electrically-recorded phonograph disc?

**Janis:** Well, in St. Louis, we found a man who collects old ragtime rolls and also possesses a very rare type of pianola, a mechanism that you push up to the front of the piano. It has wooden fingers that strike the keys just like human fingers. So while he pumped the pedals and put expression into the music, we recorded the sound with the most modern equipment.

**Weinstock:** I'm sure that by now our listeners are eager to hear the record. I want to thank you, Harriet Janis, and you, Rudi Blesh, for this interview. I'm sure that your book, *They All Played Ragtime*, will prove as fascinating to readers everywhere as it has to me.

**APPENDIX C**

**“TICKLISH TOM—A CAROLINA CAKEWALK”  
BY BRYAN S. WRIGHT**

Respectfully dedicated to my friend Robert Schwieger

# Ticklish Tom

## A Carolina Cakewalk

Allegro.

Bryan S. Wright

Piano

mf f

Musical notation for measures 1-5. The piece is in 2/4 time with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The first system shows the piano introduction. The right hand has a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, and the left hand has a rhythmic accompaniment. Dynamics are marked *mf* and *f*. There are accents and slurs throughout.

Musical notation for measures 6-10. The right hand continues the melodic line, and the left hand provides a steady accompaniment. The dynamics remain consistent with the previous system.

Musical notation for measures 11-15. The right hand features a more active melodic line with slurs and accents. The left hand continues its accompaniment.

Musical notation for measures 16-20. The piece concludes with a double bar line and first/second endings. The right hand has a final melodic flourish, and the left hand provides a final accompaniment.

Copyright MMV by Bryan S. Wright  
Lynchburg, Virginia

22 *8va* 2nd time *trem. 2nd time* *trem. 2nd time*

*f* *mp* *f*

27 *(8va)* *trem. 2nd time*

*f*

32

*mp* *f*

37

*f*

42

*f*

Ticklish Tom

47 *sfz*

53 *mf - f*

57

62 *on repeat 8<sup>va</sup> 15<sup>ma</sup>*

Ticklish Tom

Musical score for measures 67-71. The piece is in a key with two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 3/4 time signature. The right hand features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, while the left hand provides a steady accompaniment of eighth notes. A first ending bracket spans measures 70 and 71, with a second ending marked '2.' below it.

Musical score for measures 72-76. The right hand has a complex texture with many beamed notes and slurs. The left hand continues with eighth-note accompaniment. A dynamic marking of *ff* (fortissimo) is present at the beginning of measure 72.

Musical score for measures 77-82. The right hand continues with intricate melodic patterns and slurs. The left hand maintains the eighth-note accompaniment. The texture is dense with many beamed notes.

Musical score for measures 83-87. The right hand features a series of chords and melodic fragments. The left hand continues with eighth-note accompaniment. A dynamic marking of *sfz* (sforzando) is present at the end of measure 86. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat signs.

Ticklish Tom

## APPENDIX D

### LISTING OF SELECTED INTERVIEWS

The following listing includes only those interviews I conducted which were especially helpful in my study.

Ballard, Faye. Telephone. 10 January 2015.

Bradford, Robert. Telephone. 21 October 2015.

Cather, Bryan. Telephone. 16 February 2011.

Drury, Jimmy. Telephone. 2 March 2011.

Edwards, Bill. Telephone. 8 January 2015.

Erdos, Bob. York, Pennsylvania. 25 July 2014.

Lemen, Ted. Telephone. 19 December 2014.

Leschewski, Judy. Telephone. 20 December 2014.

Lundberg, Peter. Sedalia, Missouri. 5 June 2014.

Morath, Max. Telephone. 9 July 2014.

Purvis, Stacy. Telephone. 21 February 2011.

Reffkin, David. Sedalia, Missouri. 2 June 2010.

—. Sedalia, Missouri. 3 June 2011.

Remmers, John. Telephone. 17 February 2011.

Spitznagel, Martin. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. 4 November 2011.



Uslan, Ethan. Telephone. 13 November 2014.

Warner, Tom. Telephone. 17 February 2011.

Whitcomb, Ian. Telephone. 25 July 2014.

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