

# The genre of ragtime: history and famous composers

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## **Introduction**

During the turn of the 19th century, a new form of music known as ragtime swept across America at a roaring pace. The genre originated from several styles of music including banjo music, syncopated rhythms like the cakewalk, and British Isles dances or jigs. This style of music became popular before music was recorded, so rags were primarily published as sheet music. Many of the world's best rags were published in the early 1900's by a man named John S. Stark. The first publishing of a rag caused an overwhelming influx of ragtime publications by composers Scott Joplin, James Scott, Joseph Lamb and several other composers. Ragtime is a very intriguing genre as its structure was shaped and devised by a small mass of itinerant musicians who could all be traced to one another and worked with one another to perfect and define the genre. In the early 1900's ragtime became very popular in Southern and Midwestern states, especially with Missouri becoming a major center for ragtime. The culture of ragtime has faded and reappeared throughout time becoming popular again in the 1940's from the work of Joseph Lamb, and again in the 1970's, but it is in no way forgotten today. There is a Scott Joplin festival that occurs annually in Missouri to remember and embrace ragtime. Some ragtime hits remain alive and are still influential with Scott Joplin's, "The Entertainer" being one of the most popular and well-known songs to modern day Americans.

## **History**

Directly after the civil war, components of black southern folk music merged to create a distinct genre of piano music known by the 1890's as "ragtime".

The styles of ragtime developed from former slaves and minstrel shows performed by itinerant musicians who played portable instruments such as the guitar, banjo, mandolin, and violin. Ragtime eventually turned into an absolute piano instrumental genre by musicians in Mississippi. Ragtime piano music, involves two parts, syncopation that is a change or displacement of a beat usually performed with the right hand, played against a constant low-pitched tune that is performed by the left hand. This style also includes known folk techniques, reverb, and dance beats. Before this genre obtained its final name, it was called “jig-piano” or “ragged time” by the first enthusiasts to describe the playing of a banjo on the piano. The influence of many black musicians in Missouri and Kansas transposed this music into an attentively recorded musical category known as “ragtime” by the end of the 19th century. This music emerged from the southern and midwestern states with the bulk of the action occurring in St. Louis, Missouri. Most of the best rags came from St. Louis. Some of the musicians that revolutionized piano ragtime that will be discussed later are James Scott, Joseph Lamb, and Scott Joplin. The first published rag was in 1897 by the band arranger, William H. Krells. It included musical notation of the rag “Mississippi Rag.” Not too long after this first publication, many other rags were published, including Scott Joplin’s “Original Rags” and “Maple Leaf Rag” which are the rags that most characterized the genre in the public eye. People think of Scott Joplin’s rags when they hear the word ragtime. In the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, ragtime has made its way through America by traveling musicians, musical notation or scores, automatic piano tape rolls, and phonographs. Ragtime was growing so quickly, it attracted white musician Joseph Lamb. Joseph

Lamb met Joplin in New York and played one of his rags for Joplin. Joplin was impressed and recommended Lamb to his publisher where he published his first rag " Sensation Rag." James Scott is another man who met Joplin in a similar way and also was recommended to Joplin's publisher, John S. Stark, who was the owner of a music store called " John Stark and Son" and published the works of Joplin, Scott, Lamb, and many other important rag timers. Stark was a very professional and well-minded person, treating the black composers that he sponsored with respect. Stark's first music store was in St. Louis, but he later moved to New York City where he later met Joseph Lamb. Ragtime eventually became very popular being published all around the United States. It was also quickly recognized in Europe and became a very popular genre of music over there. Other styles of music began to incorporate certain components of ragtime such as syncopation to create fascinating sounds. Ragtime eventually evolved into jazz in Chicago with the influence of ragtime composers Joe Jordan, Tony Jackson, and multiple other influential composers. The years between 1895 and 1915 were known as the " ragtime age" and the basis of ragtime was formed by a small group of talented musicians who all worked with each other and the same publisher.

## **Interview**

For this assignment, I decided to interview my cousin Ben Weiss. Ben is a very talented and well-rounded musician with marvelous skills in guitar, piano, saxophone, drums, banjo, bass, and the ukulele. He was born on June 28, 1995 and is currently 24 years old. Bens first and one of his best

instruments is the piano. He started taking weekly Saturday morning lessons that were two hours long when he was seven years old. Ben's father is also a professional piano player and a huge enthusiast of multiple genres, including ragtime, teaching Ben how to play a few of Joplin's songs on the piano. By the time Ben was ten or eleven, he was well educated at reading sheet music and did occasional performances at piano recitals, playing several genres like classical, ragtime, gospel, and many others. His next instrument was the saxophone, the drums, and then the guitar with the guitar and piano being the two instruments he is most talented at. After taking lessons and playing guitar for several years, Ben was easily able to pick up the bass, banjo, and ukulele. In 2013, Ben actually played the song "The Entertainer" by Scott Joplin on the guitar for his audition at Berkley College of Music. Ben received a BA in Contemporary Writing and Production from Berkley College of Music in 2017. Today, he plays music in bars all over the Los Angeles area with several bands. They play many different genres of music including, rock, blues, funk, jazz, and even some ragtime. Ben said, "I have probably done this a 5 times in the past few months but occasionally during the intermission at a bar show, I will play the song "The Entertainer" on the piano just to see what response I will get and surprisingly, I get a really good reactions. There are a slim few who turn their head and think, "whoa that's old", while many are intrigued by it and show their appreciation with an applause." Ben is just at the beginning of his musical career, working as an aspiring musician and writing music in multiple genres. Ben works as a guitar teacher giving private lessons all over Los Angeles and online, writing music for advertising companies and working as a freelancer. Ben has some

knowledge of the life of Scott Joplin and his associations with John Stark. Ben stated how he knows that Joplin was the son of former slaves and that he released his first rag in Missouri during the late 1890's. Ben also said, "Ragtime is difficult to play at first because your left hand is keeping a steady bass-like beat and the other hand is doing all the crazy stuff, but once you get a hang of it, it becomes one of the most fun genres to play on the piano." This interview is relevant to my research because it shows how ragtime, being an old style of music, is still a well-known and enjoyable style and has not just simply been forgotten. Something else I would like to mention is that I questioned my friends and family on what they think of this style. Many of my friends and family members didn't know what ragtime is, but when I played "The Entertainer" for them, and most of them said, "That's like one of the most popular songs ever." I could tell the song was inspiring to them because they would bob their heads side to side and mimic playing the piano. I learned a lot of things in this interview and gained a small perspective of how that ragtime initiates feelings of happiness to the composer and the audience at hand.

## **The Lifestyles of Iconic Ragtime Composers**

A few of the revolutionary ragtime composers whose lives I would like to discuss in more detail include Scott Joplin, James Scott, and Joseph Lamb. Scott Joplin is probably the most well known ragtime pianist of all time. He wrote over sixty compositions throughout his musical career including some of the world's best selling ragtime songs of all time such as "The Entertainer" and "Maple Leaf Rag". Scott Joplin was born along the border of

Texas and Arkansas between the months of June 1867 and January 1868. The exact date of his birth is unknown. In fact, many specifics about his life are unknown. For the first few years of his life, Scott and his family lived on a farm where Joplin's dad worked as a slave laborer. They eventually moved to a town called Texarkana when slavery was abolished where Scott spent the majority of his childhood years. Joplin was raised in a family of musicians. His mother played the banjo and was a singer, and his father was a violinist. Joplin's first instrument was the banjo but he later learned how to play the piano, displaying true interest and talent toward it. He also knew how to sing and play the cornet. Somewhere in the 1880's when Joplin was in his late teens, he left his hometown of Texarkana to Sedalia, Missouri. From there, he became part of a band and traveled eastward where he toured and made a living as an itinerant musician. He played at saloons, theaters, private homes, and bordellos. Whenever Scott returned to Sedalia, he worked at the Maple Leaf and Black 400. These were communal organizations created where black men could gather and socialize during a time not long after the abolishment of slavery. In 1898, Joplin tried to publish his first few rags but was obligated to share credit with a staff arranger named Charles N. Daniels. Joplin got the help of a lawyer, Robert Higdon to make a contract with the local publisher, John S. Stark, where Joplin would collect a penny for every copy of sheet music sold for his next rag, " Maple Leaf Rag". " Sales in the first year were slight, only about 400, but by 1909, approximately a half-million copies had been sold, and that rate was to continue for the next two decades."(Scott). This shows just how quickly his music spread throughout the United States. Joplin started writing operas but many of them failed

because his funds were stolen from him and John Stark refused to publish them. This caused the two to take a temporary break from each other in 1903 but they reconciled and continued working together again in 1907. For the next ten years, Joplin lived in St. Louis where he created many more rags and operas, such as "The Entertainer" and "Treemonisha", equaling up to sixty works of art. Scott Joplin died in 1917 after suffering from syphilis. When Joplin died, ragtime sort of died along his side. However, generations after his death, one of his rags was featured in the movie "The Sting" in 1973, sparking the genre to become popular again for a short while. His song "The Entertainer" became one of the most well known songs in United States history. In 1976, the Pulitzer Prize committee awarded Joplin with a posthumous award, giving recognition to the man who created the foundations of this marvelous genre.

James Scott is one of the three greatest ragtime composers along with Scott Joplin as discussed above, and Joseph Lamb who will be discussed soon. James Scott was born on February 12, 1885 in Neosho, Missouri. Like Joplin, his parents were also previously slave laborers. Scott learned how to play the piano by ear at a young age with the assistance of piano lessons from his mother. He was involved in several bands and worked as a song demonstrator for music stores and publishers. His work as a song demonstrator involved playing music in saloons and other public places to advertise and assist in the sale of music scores. This connection with the store led to the publication of Scotts first few rags in 1903, including "A Summer Breeze" and "The Fascinator." Scott was a huge Joplin fan and his



musical career went to the next level when he ventured to St. Louis, Missouri in 1905 to meet Scott Joplin. Scott performed for Joplin, which impressed Joplin. Joplin led Scott to his publisher John Stark who introduced twenty-nine out of thirty-eight of Scott's music scores to the public. " He is known for his expansive use of the keyboard and a ' call and response' style melody" (Tjaden), where he would play a melodic tune and then replicate this tune but play it an octave higher. Scotts' most popular song was his rag " Frog Legs Rag." His later life was comprised of working in silent movies and as a music instructor. James Scott died on August 30, 1938 after suffering from edema.

The last of the three most iconic ragtime composers that will be discussed is Joseph Lamb. Lamb was born on December 6, 1877 in the town of Montclair, New Jersey. When Lamb was in his late teens, he moved to New York City and worked as a song demonstrator. Lamb met Scott Joplin in 1907 while shopping for Joplin's rags at a music store in New York City. While Lamb was checking out, he mentioned to the cashier that Joplin is his idol and how he really wants to meet him. Little did he know that he was in John Starks music store with Scott Joplin right next to him. Lamb played one of his rags for Joplin called " Sensation Rag" and Joplin influenced him to publish it afterwards. Lamb published twelve of his rags with John Stark over the course of ten years until around the time of Joplin's death in 1917. He decided to begin work as an accountant and music became more of a hobby for him. Ragtime was held dear to him but he did not get back into the scene again until his music became known in the late 1940's. He recorded one of

his rags for the first time in 1959. Joseph Lamb died from a heart attack at the age of seventy-two in September of 1960. "A composer almost solely by avocation, he in fact produced thirty-six piano rags, seventeen piano novelties - including the rag/novelties Hot Cinders and Arctic Sunset, twenty-odd miscellaneous pieces, and forty-three songs. Lamb was a composer of imagination, craftsmanship, experimentation, and longevity." (Tjaden). He is deemed one of the most highly organized and semi-complex ragtime pianists, creating more melodic rags than the composers before him. He did not receive recognition for his work until after his death in 1960.

## **Conclusion**

I would like to start this conclusion off by saying thank you for giving me this opportunity to introduce me to and gain knowledge of something I would have most likely never learned and really enjoyed researching about. A few weeks ago, I did not really know what ragtime was at all, but now I have a slightly greater understanding of some of the history behind it. I have become intrigued and affected by this music where whenever I listen to ragtime, I imagine having the lifestyle of a ragtime musician one hundred years in the past. This music gives me the ability to imagine more peaceful things when in times of panic or stress and that is why this research is important to me. Since I am generally more of a nervous person, this music has helped me calm my nerves and slow my racing mind. Throughout this essay, I have talked about some of the history and the most important ragtime composers who changed ragtime throughout time by either incorporating new styles to the music or increasing its complexity. I have

also talked a little bit about the emotional effects of this music on individuals and how ragtime is still appreciated today. This research is important to the study of music because it explains the lifestyle of ragtime composers and how the foundations for ragtime were built. This music is very important to American culture because ragtime is the music that represents true American folk music.

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