

Ragtime

Ragtime preceded jazz and was a popular style of American music from about 1895 to 1917. Ragtime was created by honky-tonk pianists, borrowing from syncopated music played by uneducated musicians from the south who were playing banjo, guitar, mandolin and fiddle, and is known for its steady rhythm in the bass and a syncopated melody, usually in two-four time. Ragtime compositions by Scott Joplin and many other ragtime composer/pianists became a fad and the published sheet music was widely sold throughout the country and also spread to Europe. Scott Joplin, known as the “King of Ragtime,” was the best known ragtime composer and his composition “The Entertainer” caused a revival of ragtime in 1974 when it was used in the popular motion picture “The Sting.”

Ragtime in Missouri

In describing the history of ragtime, the Library of Congress has said: “Ragtime seemed to emanate primarily from the southern and midwestern states with the majority of activity occurring in Missouri.” Scott Joplin grew up in Texarkana, Texas, traveled around the south as a musician, and came to Sedalia, Missouri in 1894, making his living teaching piano. His publication of “Maple Leaf Rag,” named for a club in Sedalia, became a huge hit around the country. John Stark was a beginning music publisher in Sedalia who heard Joplin play “Maple Leaf Rag,” published it and sold over a million copies, permitting Stark to open an office in St. Louis. Joplin moved to St. Louis in 1901, staying there until 1907 when he moved to New York. Other top St. Louis ragtime composers were Tom Turpin and his proteges Joe Jordan, Louis Chauvin who all played at Turpin’s saloon, the Rosebud. Ragtime pianist and composer James Scott, born in Neosho, Missouri, made Kansas City his home where he was known as the “Little Professor.” John William “Blind” Boone was born near Miami, Missouri, and toured the United States and Canada, and his home in Columbia, Missouri is on the National Register of Historic Places. Sedalia, Missouri has been hosting a Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival since 1974, and Joplin’s house in St. Louis is a State Historic Site operated by Missouri State Parks. Pianist and ragtime scholar/author Trebor Tichenor founded the St. Louis Ragtimers in 1961 and the four original members stayed together for over 50 years, performing in St. Louis and beyond. St. Louis native and classically-trained pianist Stephanie Trick travels the world with her husband Paolo Alderighi, playing ragtime, stride, boogie-woogie and early jazz.

Ragtime Bios

Scott Joplin

Scott Joplin (1868-1917) was an African American composer and pianist who achieved fame for his ragtime compositions. During his brief career, he wrote over 100 original ragtime pieces, one ragtime ballet, and two operas. His most influential piece, *The Maple Leaf Rag*, served as a model for hundreds of future ragtime compositions.

Joplin grew up in a musical family of laborers in Texarkana, Arkansas, and his parents taught him to play piano and banjo. He developed his own musical knowledge with the help of local teachers, especially Julian Weiss, a German-born piano teacher who recognized his talent and introduced him to classical music. In the 1880s, the family moved to Sedalia, Missouri, and he attended Lincoln High School there.

As a young man, Joplin traveled the country performing with different musical groups. He went to Chicago to perform at the World's Fair of 1893, which played a major part in making ragtime a national craze by 1897. Joplin continued to make his home base in Sedalia, where he earned a living as a piano teacher. He began publishing his music in

1895 and had great success with many of his ragtime compositions. In 1901, Joplin moved to St. Louis, where he continued to compose and publish and regularly performed in the community.

In 1907, Joplin moved to New York City though he was in ill health, hoping to find a producer for an opera he had composed, *Treemonisha*. He did not succeed in mounting a production and he died there at the age of 48. Joplin's death is widely considered to mark the end of the Ragtime Era and the genre evolved with other styles into stride, jazz and eventually big band swing.

Joplin's music was rediscovered and returned to popularity in the early 1970s with the release of a million-selling album recorded by Joshua Rifkin. This was followed by the Academy Award-winning 1973 film *The Sting*, which featured several of Joplin's compositions, most notably *The Entertainer*, a piece performed by Marvin Hamlisch that received wide airplay. *Treemonisha* was finally produced in full, to wide acclaim, in 1972. In 1976, Joplin was posthumously awarded a Pulitzer Prize.

The house in which Joplin lived in St. Louis has been preserved and is recognized as a United States National Historic Landmark, the first state historic site dedicated to African American heritage maintained by the Missouri Department of Natural Resources.

James Scott

James Sylvester Scott (1885-1938) was a composer and pianist who is regarded today as an important composer of classic ragtime. Born in Neosho, Missouri, Scott was the son of former slaves. His family moved to Carthage, Missouri in 1901, where he attended Lincoln High School. After taking music lessons as a boy, he was given his first piano at the age of 16.

Scott spent the next several years playing in bands and saloons and working as a song-plugger for the Dumars Music Company in Carthage. He included his own compositions in the music he demonstrated, and the demand led to Dumars' publication of Scott's first two rags, "A Summer Breeze" and "The Fascinator," in 1903.

In 1905, Scott traveled to St. Louis, where he met his idol, Scott Joplin, and asked him to listen to one of his rags. Joplin was impressed and introduced him to his own publisher, John Stark, who published Scott's "Frog Legs Rag" a year later. It quickly became a hit and was second in sales only to Joplin's own "Maple Leaf Rag." Scott became a regular contributor to Stark's catalogue until 1922.

In 1914, Scott moved to Kansas City where he met and married Nora Johnson. He became a music teacher there and an accompanist and arranger for silent movies. With the advent of talking films, however, Scott lost his primary source of employment. He worked as an accompanist for dances and continued to teach, perform and compose. For a time, he led an eight-piece band that played at beer parks and movie theaters in the area. After his wife's death, he lived with his cousin, Ruth Callahan in Kansas City, Kansas where he died in 1938.

Scott composed and performed waltzes and marches but is most remembered for his ragtime compositions. His best-known works include "Climax Rag," "Frog Legs Rag" and "Grace and Beauty."

Blind Boone

John William "Blind" Boone (1864-1927) was born in a Federal militia camp near Miami, Missouri, during the Civil War. His mother was a former slave who worked as a cook in the camp and his father was a bugler in the 7th Missouri State Militia Cavalry. At six months, John fell ill to "brain fever" and became blind as a result of the treatment he received, which was to remove his eyes in order to relieve the brain swelling.

After the war, Rachel and John moved to Warrensburg, Missouri, where his mother met and married Harrison Hendricks. Rachel was concerned that her son John would find life too difficult without education. Several Warrensburg residents banded together and helped pay for him to attend the St. Louis School for the Blind, where he heard and played the piano for the first time. He immediately showed great musical talent but was not interested in school. Instead, he often wandered off to listen to music in the local bars and was eventually expelled because of his absences.

He returned to Warrensburg, where he played with local musicians but was often exploited, earning little or nothing. In 1879, his mother was contacted by a Columbia, Missouri contractor and entertainment manager, John B. Lange, Jr., who like Boone, was also of mixed race. He made a commitment to the family to advance Boone's career and share with them in the profits. Lange gave Boone the stage name of "Blind John."

Boone had a phenomenal memory that enabled him to reproduce a piece of music perfectly after only one hearing. But he had little musical training, and his professional career did not take off until he had the opportunity, around 1883, to study classical music and piano technique for three months with Mary R. Sampson in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

On his return from Iowa, Lange found his young protégé had acquired new skills and they began touring all over the country, gradually gaining more success. In 1889, Boone married John Lange's youngest sister, Eugenia Lange, and she often traveled with the company. At the height of his fame, Boone was playing 300-plus dates annually. In an age before records, Blind Boone became one of the first black artists recorded by the QRS Piano Roll Company in 1912, playing eleven selections while a machine punched the notes on the roll.

Blind Boone performed a mix of classical and popular music, African American folk tunes, and spirituals on every concert. By uniting all these musical forms on the concert stage, he developed a uniquely American sound. His adoption of the "ragged" or syncopated rhythms of the African American community and the heavy bass line of his informal musical compositions inspired the development of ragtime music.

After Lange's death in 1916, Boone had several managers but never found the financial success he had in his partnership with Lange. Without savings, he was forced to continue performing until the end of his life. He died of acute dilation of the heart in October 1927 in Warrensburg and was buried in an unmarked grave.

After his death, with the growing popularity of jazz, Boone's music was almost forgotten. Since the mid-1950s, however, momentum to reestablish his place in music history has grown. A park in Warrensburg now bears his name, and the Columbia-Boone County Sesquicentennial Commission erected a tombstone on Boone's grave in 1971. Boone's home in Columbia is on the National Register of Historic Places and has been restored through the efforts of the John William "Blind" Boone Heritage Foundation.