

Scott Joplin: King of Ragtime

by Tim Wilton

A few days before America entered World War I in April 1917, Texas-born composer and pianist Scott Joplin, the "King of Ragtime," passed away in his sleep at Manhattan State Hospital in New York City, a victim of tertiary syphilis. He was buried in St. Michael's Cemetery in the Astoria section of Queens. Sadly, his death did not make the headlines.

Today, Joplin is recognized as one of the most important figures in the history of American popular music, and if a Mount Rushmore of American composers were ever to be carved out of the side of a mountain, certainly Joplin's face would be chiseled in there along with George Gershwin, Irving Berlin and (with apologies to perhaps a dozen or so just as deserving composers) Bob Dylan.

Yet despite all of the posthumous recognition bestowed upon Joplin, many of the facts regarding his life still elude us today.

Joplin, the second of six children, was born in east Texas, near Linden, to Jiles Joplin and Florence Givens. For many years, his birth date was thought to be November 24, 1868 and is celebrated as such at many ragtime music festivals, most notably the Scott Joplin Ragtime Music Festival in Sedalia, Missouri.

However, ragtime historian Edward A. Berlin cites the July 1870 U.S. census as proof that Joplin must have been born between June 1867 and mid-January 1868, because he was listed as a two year old. He further points out that the June 1880 U.S. census listed him as a twelve year old.

Still, very little is known about his childhood, and most of what is known is anecdotal.

Sometime after 1871, Jiles Joplin moved his family to the newly established town of Texarkana, Texas. Jiles, a laborer and former slave, was said to have possessed a slight musical ability and had encouraged his children to learn and play musical instruments. Along with Scott, two of his brothers (Robert and Will) became musical performers.

(In fact, this encouragement is probably rooted in the fact that after the Civil War had ended and African-American slaves were emancipated, they did not really possess economic or political freedom. Efforts by former slaves after the war to improve their own lives were stifled by strong resistance from many whites (in the north and south) who did not want to deal with them as equals. Laws were passed that legalized racial discrimination and made voting nearly impossible for non-whites. And the only jobs available to African-Americans at the time were poor paying menial labor jobs. However, there were three exceptions: teacher, preacher, and musician. Throughout the nineteenth century, black musicians had long been accepted by white America, although only within the boundaries of "low-class" entertainment venues such as dance halls and minstrel shows. Nevertheless, professional musicianship was a way for African-Americans to at least rise economically above what white society had expected of them work-wise.)

The young Joplin gained access to a piano in a white-owned home where his mother worked as a domestic, and quickly taught himself the rudiments of music. Soon, his talent was noticed by a Texarkana music teacher, German-born Julius Weiss, who instructed him further, placing special emphasis on European art forms including opera, especially Wagner. Eventually, Joplin's parents were able to save enough money to buy him a second hand piano from a prominent Texarkana family.

In the 1880's, Joplin moved to Sedalia to attend Lincoln High School. He later worked as a traveling musician playing piano in various brothels and saloons. While playing in St. Louis

(which would become the major hub for ragtime music), Joplin met and became friends with ragtime pioneer Tom Turpin.

Joplin's budding musical career was first documented in local newspapers upon his returning to Texarkana in 1891 to join a minstrel group, and then a subsequent trip to the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, where he led a band and played cornet. By this time, ragtime was emerging as a viable music genre that was quickly gaining wider acceptance in large American cities. And although Joplin played (and later composed) ragtime to make a living as a musician, he yearned to compose music that was in the classical tradition of western art music since this was the music of his background and education, courtesy of Julius Weiss, his mentor in Texarkana.

He returned to Sedalia in 1894 and became the lead cornet player in a twelve-piece ensemble of African-American musicians, the Queen City Cornet Band. A year later, he formed a vocal band, the Texas Medley Quartette, and performed as far east as Syracuse, New York, where his first two music publications were issued: *Please Say You Will* and *A Picture of Her Face*. These are not the piano "rags" for which Joplin was later known for, but rather they were called "parlor songs." A piano rag is basically a modification of a march or waltz highlighted by a syncopated (or ragged) melody, and usually written in 2/4 or 4/4 time but rarely exceeding 68 bars.

While still living in Sedalia, Joplin attended music classes at George R. Smith College, an institution for African-Americans, where he also taught piano and composition to several young musicians in the area, most notably Scott Hayden and Arthur Marshall, with whom he later collaborated. Sadly, the college and its records were destroyed in a fire in 1925, and so there is no evidence of the extent of Joplin's studies. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that Joplin never mastered music notation while at George R. Smith, which is ironic considering Joplin's later accomplishments as a musician and composer.

By 1898, Joplin had become an in-demand piano player and performed at various events and dances in the area, including Sedalia's only two social clubs for black men, The Maple Leaf and the Black 400. And despite Joplin's lack of technical music knowledge, he was quickly developing his gift for composition and had already published two marches and a waltz. By the end of that year, he tried to publish his first two piano rags, but only succeeded in publishing *Original Rags* for the Kansas City music firm, Carl Hoffman, which released the rag in early 1899. Paid a flat \$25 fee and forced to share credit with a staff arranger, Charles N. Daniels, Joplin vowed to be more careful in his dealings with publishers.

In today's terms, a "publication" of a song is akin to releasing a single on record, except back then, the music was published as sheet music, then sold to musicians--professional and otherwise. Ideally, the composer would receive a royalty of a penny (or even less) for each copy sold. But most of the time, the composer was paid a flat one-time fee and was never paid any royalties. Additionally, compositions were distributed and sold via piano rolls for player pianos--an ideal medium for both ragtime and classical music.

In late 1899, Joplin sold what would become the genre's greatest piece, *Maple Leaf Rag*, to Sedalia music publisher John Stark & Son, and with the help of a lawyer secured a one-cent royalty for each piece sold. The song would go on to sell more than a million copies, providing Joplin a steady income for the rest of his life and certifying ragtime as the most popular American music genre for the next couple of decades.

Having earned a national reputation based on the success of *Maple Leaf Rag*, the newly dubbed "King of Ragtime" moved to St. Louis in early 1900 with his new wife Belle and during the next three years produced some of his most well known works, including *The Entertainer*, *Elite Syncopations*, *March Majestic*, and *A Breeze From Alabama*.

It is important to note that many turn-of-the-century writers categorized music according to a strict scale of values. At the top of the scale was classical music, having excellence that was

both moral and artistic. Of course, opera was at the very top of this scale. Ragtime, which was perceived as having African-American origins, was ultimately placed at the bottom of this scale. Critics blasted ragtime as a musical form that lacked artistic and moral merit. Although Joplin did not agree with these sentiments, he did feel that ragtime would never bring him the artistic respect that he so desired. And despite his success as the "King of Ragtime," his ambition was always to write for the lyric theatre.

Fortunately, Joplin's musical background was broader than what could be expressed in ragtime, and by the end of 1901 or early 1902, he began work on his first opera, *A Guest of Honor*. The opera commemorates the story of then President Theodore Roosevelt inviting America's most famous African-American, Booker T. Washington, to the White House for dinner, an act that both enraged and thrilled large parts of America.

Having filed an application with the Copyright Office in February 1903 (but never sending the score along with the application), Joplin began in earnest to stage the opera by first forming his own company, and then rehearsing it that summer, with a subsequent tour to begin in late August. Joplin booked the opera in towns all across the mid-west through the end of October. Sadly, a company associate stole the box office receipts in early September, and Joplin consequently canceled the tour and disbanded the company, and never published the opera. Additionally, Joplin had lost most of his money on the failed tour and his marriage to Belle had ended. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the newly famous Joplin was also a very promiscuous man and may have contracted syphilis from any one of the many women he slept with during this period.

While visiting relatives in Arkansas in early 1904, he met and married nineteen-year-old Freddie Alexander, whom historians claim was his one true love. Soon after, Joplin and his new bride moved to Sedalia, where he continued to compose and perform. Sadly, Freddie died of

pneumonia a mere ten weeks after they were married and Joplin, devastated by this loss, left Sedalia and never returned.

In 1907, after having lived in St. Louis and Chicago, and with more than forty published works, mostly rags and waltzes, Joplin moved to New York City with the intention of finding a publisher for his second opera, *Treemonisha*, at the time a work still in progress.

Joplin completed *Treemonisha* in 1910, and after failing to find a publisher willing to issue the rather formidable 250-page score, he published it with his own money.

Incidentally, Joplin had tried to sell *Treemonisha* to a New York publishing firm, Ted Snyder Music, whose staff lyricist and sometime composer was a young Irving Berlin. Berlin turned it down, but several months later published his own hugely successful *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, which strongly resembled parts of *Treemonisha*. Upon learning this, Joplin altered parts of his opera before releasing it.

According to biographer Edward Berlin (no relation to Irving), Joplin's libretto for *Treemonisha* was filled with autobiographical references to his mother, to Freddie, and to the music of rural Arkansas. An allegory proposing that racial equality could only come from education, *Treemonisha* relates how a young woman, the only educated person in her small black community in rural Arkansas, leads her townspeople out of the bondage of ignorance and superstition. Although the opera hadn't yet been performed on stage, the editor of the very influential *American Musician and Art Journal* did receive a copy of the score from Joplin, and after reviewing it, declared *Treemonisha* to be the most "American" opera ever composed, even superior to the recent \$10,000 winner of the American opera prize from the Metropolitan Opera, Horatio Parker's *Mona*.

Buoyed by the long sought after critical praise, Joplin spent the next four years trying to stage *Treemonisha*. Except for a few dry run-throughs and a partial performance, Joplin never saw his beloved opera staged during his lifetime.

By 1916, Joplin was experiencing the devastating physical and mental effects of tertiary syphilis. In mid-January 1917, Joplin was admitted to Manhattan State Hospital where friends recounted that he would have bursts of lucidity in which he would hurriedly jot down lines of music before relapsing into dementia.

On April 1, 1917 Scott Joplin passed away with a few friends at his side.

At the time of his death, Joplin was almost forgotten. Ragtime's popularity had already begun to decline while jazz and swing started to dominate American popular music. Most of Joplin's musical papers, including unpublished manuscripts, were willed to good friend and fellow composer Wilber Sweatman. Sweatman generously shared the few papers left him by Joplin with fellow musicians and ragtime aficionados. Sadly, the papers were lost during a dispute between Sweatman's heirs following his death in 1961.

After a couple of decades of dormancy, ragtime enjoyed a short revival in the early '40s as jazz musicians began to include piano rags in their repertoire. A greater revival in ragtime music, particularly Joplin's classic rags, occurred during the 1970s. Joplin's beloved *Treemonisha* was finally staged at Morehouse College in 1972; the Oscar-winning *Sting* featured his rag *The Entertainer* that reached #3 on the national sales charts in 1974; The Royal Ballet staged *Elite Syncopations* featuring his music as well as other rags from his time; and he was awarded a posthumous Pulitzer Prize in 1976 for his special contributions to American music.

Scott Joplin, the "King of Ragtime," is no longer a forgotten figure from a forgotten era of music. Joplin's dedication to expanding, perfecting and legitimizing what was originally considered a music form that lacked artistic and moral merit ultimately immortalized him as one of the truly great music innovators in the history of American popular music.