Lecture 2
Origins of Jazz: Ragtime

• The first truly American genre of music, predating jazz
• Peak popularity between 1899-1918
• Began as popular dance music years before being published as popular piano sheet music

The History of Ragtime

• The heyday of ragtime predated the widespread availability of sound recording
• Originally called “ragged time” which later became corrupted to “ragtime”
• Began as a modification of the march, which was popular in that day
• Ragtime originated in African American musical communities, in the late 19th century
• It descended from the jigs and marches played by all-black bands common in all Northern cities with black populations
• By the start of the 20th century it became widely popular throughout North America and was listened and danced to, performed, and written by people of many different subcultures
• A distinctly American musical style, ragtime may be considered a synthesis of African-American syncopation and European classical music, though this description is oversimplified

What is Ragtime?

• It was usually written in 2/4 or 4/4 time
• It contained a predominant left hand pattern of bass notes on odd-numbered beats and chords on even-numbered beats
• This accompanied a syncopated melody in the right hand
• A composition in this style is called a “rag”
• A rag written in 3/4 time is a “ragtime waltz”
• Ragtime served as the roots for stride piano, a more improvisational piano style popular in the 1920s and 1930s
The Credibility of Ragtime

- Some authorities consider ragtime to be a form of classical music
- Like classical music, and unlike jazz, classical ragtime was and is primarily a written tradition, being distributed in sheet music rather than through recordings or by imitation of live performances
- By the 1890s, ragtime had developed into a more sophisticated theme structure of AABBACCDD

Ragtime and the Piano

- By the 1890s, the piano was becoming the most popular instrument in America
- Sales of pianos grew from 100,000 a year in 1890 to an astounding 350,000 in 1909
- The introduction of the Pianola (player piano) in 1897 helped to increase its popularity
- Ragtime music was distributed via piano rolls for player pianos

The Missouri School

- Ragtime had its center of development in the Missouri cities of St. Louis, Sedalia, and Carthage
- In these cities, a number of talented young performers and composers gathered and began exchanging ideas in the 1890s
- These included Scott Joplin, Tom Turpin, James Scott, Scott Hayden, and Louis Chavin

Scott Joplin (1867-1917)

- Born ca. 1867-68 in East Texas near Linden
- Known as “The King of Ragtime”
- One of the three most important composers of classic ragtime
  - James Scott (1886-1938)
  - Joseph Lamb (1887-1960)

The Early Years

- After 1871, the Joplin family moved to Texarkana, Texas and Scott's mother cleaned homes so Scott could have a place to practice his music.
- Showing musical ability at an early age, the young Joplin received free piano lessons from a German music teacher, Julius Weiss, who gave him a well rounded knowledge of classical music form, which would serve him well in later years and fuel his ambition to create a "classical" form of ragtime.
- He would later further his musical education by attending George R. Smith College in Sedalia, Missouri, studying music theory, harmony, and composition.
Compositions
• By 1898 Joplin had sold six pieces for the piano. Of the six, only Original Rags, a compilation of existing melodies that he wrote collaboratively, is a ragtime piece. The other five were Please Say You Will, A Picture of Her Face, two marches, and a waltz.
• In 1899, Joplin sold what would become one of his most famous pieces, Maple Leaf Rag to music publisher John Stark & Son. Joplin received a one-cent royalty for each copy and ten free copies for his own use, as well as an advance. It has been estimated that Joplin made $360 per year on this piece in his lifetime.
• Maple Leaf Rag boosted Joplin to the top of the list of ragtime performers and moved ragtime into prominence as a musical form

The St. Louis Years (1900-03)
• The Entertainer
• Elite Syncopations
• March Majestic
• Ragtime Dance
• Something Doing

Treemonisha (1911)
• Opera completed in 1910
• While it contains a wide variety of musical styles other than ragtime, some historians incorrectly refer to it as a “ragtime opera”
• It was not performed in its entirety until 1970 when the score was rediscovered
• Joplin biographer Edward A. Berlin, has stated that Treemonisha may have mirrored details from Joplin's own life. Specifically, that Joplin taught himself music fundamentals on a piano in the white home where his mother worked, just as in the opera, the title character receives her education in a white woman's home

Later Years & Death
• Illnesses
  • Terminal Syphilis
  • Dementia
  • Paranoia
  • Paralysis
• Died in New York City on April 1, 1917
• Death did not make headlines
  • Ragtime waning in popularity
  • US entry into World War I on April 6th

Joplin’s Legacy
• Joplin never made an audio recording, however he recorded several piano rolls in 1916
  • Maple Leaf Rag
  • Something Doing
  • Magnetic Rag
- Ole Miss Rag
- Weeping Willow Rag
- Pleasant Moments/Ragtime Waltz

Ragtime revival in 1970s
- Most notable was the use of Joplin’s *The Entertainer* in the soundtrack to the 1973 film *The Sting*

- 1974 ballet *Elite Syncopations* based on compositions by Joplin and other composers
- Awarded a posthumous Pulitzer Prize in 1976 for his special contribution to American music

**James Scott (1886-1938)**
- Born February 12, 1886 in Neosho, Missouri
- Learned piano by listening to his mother play folk, blues and gospel songs
- His diligence and perfect pitch made him a quick study

**The Composer**
- Beginning in 1903, Scott composed close to 40 rags
- After Scott Joplin heard Scott’s rags, he helped him land a publishing deal
- James Scott’s *Frog Legs Rag* sold almost as well as Joplin’s *Maple Leaf Rag*
- By 1921, Scott had published two dozen popular rags

**Famous Works**
- Climax Rag
- Frog Legs Rag
- Grace and Beauty
- Ophelia Rag
- *The Ragtime Oriole*

**Scott and the Decline of Ragtime**
- Jazz began to eclipse ragtime in popularity in the 1920s
- In protest, Scott wrote a song entitled *Don’t Jazz Me Rag* in 1921
- By the late 1920s, Scott could not find a publisher for his new compositions

**Joseph Lamb (1887-1960)**
- Born December 6, 1887 in Montclair, New Jersey
- Had no formal musical training
- Learned the piano by watching his sisters who were classical pianists and studying musical scores
- Never performed professionally

**The Composer**
- A chance meeting with Scott Joplin in the offices of John Stark, Joplin’s publisher, led to Joplin’s sponsorship and Stark’s publication of 12 of Lamb’s rags
- Stark published Lamb's music for the next decade, starting with *Sensation*
• Lamb, of Irish descent, was the only one of the “Big Three” composers of classical ragtime with European ancestry

**Famous Compositions**

• Sensation
• American Beauty Rag
• Ragtime Nightingale
• Cleopatra Rag
• The Top Liner Rag
• Bohemia Rag

**Sources**

• History and Tradition of Jazz by Thomas E. Larson
• Jazz for Dummies by Dirk Sutro
• http://en.wikipedia.org

**Discography**

1. “Pine Apple Rag,” “The Entertainer,” “Maple Leaf Rag,” and “Something Doing” by Scott Joplin
   from the album *Scott Joplin: The Entertainer*
   Biograph DK 30155
2. “Overture” and “The Bag of Luck” by Scott Joplin
   from the album *Joplin: Treemonisha (Gunther Schuller)*
   Deutsch Grammophon B0004589-02
3. “Grace and Beauty,” “The Ragtime Oriole,” and “Don’t Jazz Me-Rag” by James Scott
   from the album *James Scott: The Complete Works (Guido Nielsen)*
   Basta Records 30-91002
4. “Top Liner Rag,” and “Ragtime Nightingale” by Joseph Lamb
   from the album *Joseph Lamb: The Complete Stark Rags (Guido Nielsen)*
   Basta Records