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The King of Ragtime

At the beginning of the twentieth century, America was a country that was just beginning to carve out a place for itself in the musical world. Up until that point, listeners around the world viewed American artists’ music as weak copies of English music, which also happened to be seen as the European nation that created the weakest concert music (Piras). But how did that America eventually become the nation it was known to be in the early twentieth century, a nation of jazz and blues? For the country’s music to finally evolve into something of its own, American artists first had to broaden the scope of their influences past mainly European music. It also took a new musician with a unique sound in order to grip the nation in such a way. Eventually, this genre of music became known as ragtime. Although not the first musician to write in the new genre of music that would forever change the course of music in America, the composer Scott Joplin, along with his revolutionary song *Maple Leaf Rag,* was instrumental in composing America’s obsession with ragtime. This composer “blew the lid off the musical world and set it into the greatest musical craze that the world has ever known” (Curtis 82). Scott Joplin’s *Maple Leaf Rag* is a composition that drew influences from many different cultures, and, with the song’s popularization, America adopted its own unique genres of music.

Early on in his life, Scott Joplin’s life experiences and musical teachings began to influence the music he would eventually become famous for composing in his adult years. When Scott Joplin was a young boy growing up in Texarkana, Arkansas during the late nineteenth century, his parents noticed his natural music talent at an early age. It could even be that his love for creating music was in his blood, as his mother and father played the banjo and violin respectively. When his parents discovered how skilled their son was in playing music, they had him learn skills from music teachers whenever possible. According to one source, “By the time Scott was seven, he taught himself to play a neighbor’s piano. His father managed to scrape together enough money so he was able to buy an old fashioned square grand, and the young Scott’s ability at the instrument soon became a source of local pride” (Garrett). In his childhood, Joplin had multiple different music teachers, including a mulatto woman named Meg Washington and a man named J.C. Johnson who was part black and part Native American. Already, he was gaining knowledge and influence from different peoples and cultures, influences that would go directly into his musical compositions. Perhaps Joplin’s most influential music teacher during his adolescence was a German immigrant named Julius Weiss. Weiss was an “educated German [who] could open the door to a world of learning and music of which young Joplin was largely unaware. He undoubtedly introduced Joplin to the elements of opera and to works by classical composers.” (Garrett). Some historians and scholars even attribute his influence to Joplin’s desire for recognition as a serious artist, to his having composed a ballet and two operas. While teaching young Joplin, Weiss’s lessons in piano and theory were free to the boy. “He also introduced Scott to the music of the European masters, and for a time it seemed the youth was on his way toward becoming a concert pianist.” (Garrett). Although Joplin never did become a concert pianist, like Weiss had hoped for him, the influences of these early childhood teachers, people from diverse cultures and backgrounds, remained in his works throughout the decades. As Scott grew into adulthood and began to develop his own musical style, he “memorized the music he learned as a child and combined it with the popular tunes of his time” (Bankston).

African American slave music highly influenced many American composers during the Ragtime era and Joplin, as the son of a former slave, was no exception. Music from slave times took African music of cultural significance and combined it with hymns and spiritual messages, as much of slaves’ music had spiritual and religious significance. This music was sung in fields and performed in front of white plantation owners, but this music that “came from bondage […] only began to reach a wider audience following their freedom”. It was not until the publication of Uncle Tom’s Cabin in 1852 that white America was actually shown the life of slavery from slaves’ eyes, but that beginning of understanding opened many Americans’ ears to African American musicians’ music. (Bankston). For example, Joplin “often employed African American folk idioms like pentatonicism and call and response”. These two musical traits were both in Maple Leaf Rag and became common parts of later ragtime music (Stewart 97). In addition to traditional African American music, ragtime is thought to have been influenced by other genres, some with white origins, some with black origins, and some with origins from different races. The march is one type of music that is most clearly connected, as roughly a third of all ragtime pieces clearly related back to marches, whether by means of titles, subtitles, cover descriptions, or tempo indications. The cakewalk, another important influence, was “a grand-promenade type of dance of plantation origins in which the slave couple performing the most attractive steps and motions would ‘take the cake’”. The black character piece was the next type of music to influence ragtime. This new genre was a musical image of black Americans and, to an extension, life in the south in general. This music also introduced the syncopated rhythms Scott Joplin and other famous ragtime composers would be known and praised for in the future. Interestingly, music historians say ragtime was heavily influenced by Caribbean dance rhythms because of the fact that, “the treble melodic rhythms are often identical to untied and tied rag syncopations” (*Ragtime* 99). Although, contradictory to this idea, others claim ragtime was the one to influence Caribbean dance music. Others still believe there is no significant resemblance to the two types of music to accurately predict whether one type of music influenced the other (*Ragtime*).

As ragtime gained popularity, many white Americans across the country quickly embraced this music, which was widely composed and performed by African American musicians. As earlier stated, up until this point in American music history, this country had not yet created genres of its own and tended to copy European music. This was before America’s massive influx of immigrants from ethnicities that wrote music that was a crucial part of their culture, such as Italians, Russians, and Jewish people, so American composers were separated from other cultures by an ocean and did not have many examples of music that was innovative and new (Piras). In the late nineteenth century, instead of drawing inspiration from other western nations, Americans turned toward plantation songs and Native Americans’ music (Hubbard-Brown). The first major event to highlight ragtime music was the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. An estimated twenty-seven million Americans attended the fair, and the event had a “profound effect on American music, art, architecture, and more” (*King of Ragtime*). One of the people in attendance at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair happened to be Scott Joplin. As a matter of fact, he was performing ragtime music along with a group of other ragtime musicians. In an interview when Joplin was asked how “ragtime” got its name, the composer replied, “Oh! Because it has such ragged movement. It suggests something like that”. Although many white Americans became obsessed with this ragged music, others called it “lilting and jaunty” and were upset over lyrics they considered vulgar. In this way, ragtime created a controversy similar to how rock ‘n’ roll would half a century later (Hubbard-Brown 2). But even though some people protested, ragtime became an indisputably important part of the country’s popular music. As Americans embraced the music of Joplin and his fellow ragtime composers, “they participated in a dramatic transformation of American popular culture – their Victorian restraint gave way to modern exuberance” (Curtis 1). But even though culture and individuality was what the music world had wanted, through the first few years of the twentieth century, ragtime music slowly began to lose what had made it so popular to begin with: its musicality rooted in African American history. “Public acceptance of ragtime … was coupled with the gradual absorption of its name and style into the mainstream of American popular music. Ragtime as an exoticism, as a quaint music from the fringes of society, was replaced by ragtime the white American popular music”. Specific changes to ragtime music during this time included a sharp decrease in minor-key openings, as they were seen as “folksy” and therefore were not thought of to have a place in the sound of new American music. There were also fewer references to the music’s black origins, such as its title, its cover picture, and whether it included a coon-song chorus. “By 1904 reference to blackness in ragtime appeared in only a minority of publications, about 20 percent, the proportions growing smaller the following years” (*Ragtime* 123). The sound and presentation of ragtime music may have been changing, but the genre remained popular a considerable amount of time into the twentieth century. Some people attribute this fact to Joplin, saying, “his work was part of the reason ragtime remained popular for the next two decades” (Bankston 8).

Joplin’s entrance into the ragtime scene, and in turn his creation of *Maple Leaf Rag*, increased the popularity of the genre immensely. After his mother passed away, Joplin began to travel around Louisiana and the Mississippi River area very frequently. He mainly spent his time in low-class establishments, as these places were dominated by African American musicians, and drew influences from the “jig piano” style of these self – taught musicians. Soon, he settled in Sedalia, Missouri (Garrett). At this point, Joplin continued to scout out inspiration for his music, as well as play in venues himself and educate other young composers and musicians. Arthur Marshall, a student and colleague of Joplin, has said of the great composer and musician, “He was kind to all of us musicians that would just, as I say, ‘flock’ around him, ’cause he was an inspiration to us all. We always treated him as daddy to the bunch of piano players here in Sedalia.” Marshall has also said, “We were playing rags before Scott Joplin came [to Sedalia], but after he came there was quite an abundant amount of playing of hot rags. … We played rags, but Scott had better form than any of them. After we got to playing rags and making them really go, the birth of rags started to spread through the central states” (*King of Ragtime* 58). Although *Maple Leaf Rag* was not officially published until 1899, Joplin claimed to have been playing a variation of the song as early as a decade before. Other African American pianists who were performing in Sedalia at the time also confirmed his claim; in theory, *Maple Leaf Rag* could have even influenced other great ragtime musicians before it was published and became widely popularized in 1899.

The events leading up to how Joplin was given the publication deal for *Maple Leaf Rag* is also an interesting and popular story, although there is no way to know exactly if this was how it went in 1899. Mildred Steward, Arthur Marshall’s daughter, accounts, “Poppa said Joplin took it to Kansas City, but didn’t make it there. He was sitting up here at the Maple Leaf Club on Main Street and playing it and John Stark walked in and heard him playing it and that’s where the *Maple Leaf Rag* was bought right then” (*King of Ragtime* 66). As Stewart’s quote hints toward, many publishers rejected *Maple Leaf Rag* prior to Joplin being approached by John Stark. During the era of the popularization of ragtime music, this was actually a revolutionary event. A white publisher approached Scott Joplin, an African American composer. As a matter of fact, “Stark would be well regarded by most black ragtime composers for the rest of his life, since he was one of the few publishers willing to give them a chance” (Hubbard-Brown 30). The first true piece of ragtime sheet music to ever be published, which was two years before the publication of Joplin’s composition, was called *Mississippi Rag* and was written by a man named William H. Krell. But at that time, specific ragtime artists and compositions were not yet widely recognized; however, when *Maple Leaf Rag* was published, the piece caught America’s attention and drew people’s focus toward the “Missouri” style of ragtime, which was just emerging. In fact, “The form of Joplin’s work eventually set the standard for other ragtime compositions, and *Maple Leaf Rag* became one of the most important pieces of ragtime music for piano” (Curtis 68). This piece’s influence over American music, and even that of other countries, was far-reaching. Within one decade of its publication, half a million copies of *Maple Leaf Rag* had been sold. These numbers were nearly unimaginable for music written and sold at this time, which proves just how intriguing and special this composition was in the eyes, and ears, of people everywhere. In addition to this already exceptional accomplishment, the publication of this piece had an even more profound meaning. As one of the first few pieces composed by an African American musician to become published, Maple Leaf Rag plays an important role in African American history and culture. This was one of the first works performed by black individuals to be incorporated into American culture without having the ulterior motive of intentionally embarrassing, stereotyping, or degrading this marginalized race of American citizens (Curtis).

As soon as it had begun, the era of ragtime quickly moved out of style and was replaced by blues and jazz, two new genres of music highly influenced by the works of Joplin and similar composers. In fact, the world seemed to move on to different genres of music almost as soon as our King of Ragtime died. It almost seemed like “ragtime [died] with Scott Joplin”. Joplin passed away in 1917 and the Original Dixieland Band “opened in New York in January [of that year] and took the city by storm, much as ragtime had more than a decade earlier. Rags were still published on occasion, but the interest in the musical form was waning” (Hubbard-Brown 85). The American musical economy was seemingly boosted by the country’s rise in status of becoming a world power after 1918, and “The United States jumped to exporting jazz and dance music worldwide in about one generation [of the ragtime era’s beginning]” (Piras). Jazz was highly influenced by Joplin’s works, as well as other musicians whose ragtime pieces became famous nationwide. These ragtime works, combined with influences of New Orleans’ syncopated music, which has different energy and musical form from ragtime, are what much of jazz music is based off of (Hubbard-Brown). Joplin also majorly influenced jazz music. In Maple Leaf Rag, he uses the pitches A♭, B♭, C♭, C, and E♭, which is a full pentatonic scale. With the note F, which is “the relative minor of A-flat major”, these six notes in total make up a hexatonic scale that would be used in so much blues music that it would be commonly referred to as “the blues scale” (Stewart 97). Later, even after jazz and blues seemed to become less popular in America, Joplin’s musical influence carried on. Decades after Joplin passed away, and the world seemingly forgot about him, his rhythms can be found in rock ‘n’ roll music. But even though ragtime seemed like a thing of the past, the world had, in fact, not forgotten about the King of Ragtime and *Maple Leaf Rag*, arguably his most widely known and influential piece. Unlike many other lesser-known ragtime compositions from the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, Maple Leaf Rag never went out of print. And when the recording of music was made more widespread in the 1920s, nine recordings were made. Also, in later years, even more recordings were done. What may be most impressive, though, is that not only did Stark keep publishing *Maple Leaf Rag*, but through the 1920s, sheet music averaged at 5,000 copies per month (Hubbard-Brown).

The deeper importance of Joplin’s *Maple Leaf Rag* can be interpreted through the study of ethnomusicology. Ethnomusicology is defined as “the study of music in culture”, and is “a field of knowledge, having as its object the investigation of the art of music as a physical, psychological, aesthetic, and cultural phenomenon” (Merriam 109). It used to be that the only things analyzed in music were purely structural, but through gaining understanding that music is a crucial part of man’s experience, “we have been moving steadily toward a consideration of broader and broader problems, not so much of definition of music styles as of an understanding of music as a human phenomenon” (Merriam 107). Simply put, “our basic understanding of the music of any people depends upon our understanding of that people's culture, the place music plays in it, and the way in which its role is played. It is through this sort of understanding that we can approach on a firm foundation our further understanding of what structure is and how music achieves whatever aesthetic ends are sought” (Merriam 109). When studying the music of a culture from an ethnomusicological perspective, there are six different aspects to consider: musical material or tone color; the text of song; the category, or genre, of music; the role and status of the musician within the community; the cultural and spiritual function of the music; and the study of music as a creative cultural activity. Clearly there are many areas of music to analyze other than the often clear-cut structure and form. Music is an art, filled with stories and emotion. To completely overlook the human aspect of music would be to discount an entire culture’s pain and struggles, or celebrations and happiness, that may be told through that music. In summation, “music does not exist by and of itself but is a part of the totality of human behavior” (Merriam 108).

As Scott Joplin’s piece *Maple Leaf Rag* has many different cultural influences and was a major catalyst in creating a unifying musical culture in America, *Maple Leaf Rag* has strong ties to ethnomusicology, and, in turn, to the more generalized field of archaeology. His influences of African American music and slave culture from the early days of America were a major theme in his music, though his white audiences often never understood, or at least did not wish to recognize, those undertones in his musical style. The publication of *Maple Leaf Rag* was also a major event for ragtime musicians and African American composers in general. Before that point, few African American musicians had really been given the recognition and appreciation they deserved. A quote made by Joplin in 1913 reads, “There has been ragtime music in America ever since the Negro race has been here, but the white people took no notice of it until about twenty years ago” (Hubbard-Brown 20). Society’s positive view of this piece also exponentially increased the popularity of ragtime music in general. Through this, Americans gained a genre of music unique to this country, a genre of music that united races instead of drove them apart. Even as ragtime’s popularity in America decreased, the King of Ragtime and his influential piece *Maple Leaf Rag* were never forgotten; his famous compositions are immortalized in their influence in some of America’s most beloved musical genres.

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