

## The King of Ragtime

by Scott Sosebee

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(May 3, 2022) When I was very young and “forced,” (because I did not understand at that age how great it would be to learn) to take piano lessons, those of us who took our lessons at that time in San Angelo became obsessed with learning how to play a certain song, “The Entertainer.” We wanted to learn how to play it because it was the theme song from a hit movie, *The Sting* starring Paul Newman and Robert Redford. What we third graders did not know was that that song was not a new one, but that it was one composed in 1902 by a Texan, Scott Joplin, a man who was known as the “king of ragtime.”

Ragtime was a genre of music that became popular at the turn of the twentieth century. Born in African American communities primarily located along the Mississippi River—like jazz and blues—much of its origins were attributable to the types of music that slaves played on plantations. Ragtime got its name from the unique syncopated, or “ragged,” rhythm that was its most recognizable component. From its roots, the music grew to the rest of the nation to become one of the popular forms, and Scott Joplin of Texarkana became its most famous composer.

Born to former slaves near Linden in 1867, Joplin learned to love music from his father who taught him the songs and measures that he had learned living as a slave on a plantation. The young boy was a prodigy, and even with such minimal training he became proficient on the banjo and had begun to play the piano. The family moved to Texarkana in 1875, and there Joplin began formal music training under Julius Weiss, a German immigrant who had come to Texas to be the private tutor for the children of a Texarkana lumber tycoon. Under Weiss, Joplin learned to read music and mastered the piano, but most importantly he learned how to compose.

Joplin worked in the Texarkana black schools until he was in his early twenties, and he also regularly performed at small concert halls and other venues in the region, but if he wanted to advance his music career he needed to leave his little corner of Texas and make his way to the cities along the Mississippi River Valley. He first traveled to Little Rock, Arkansas, and then spent a little time in Memphis, before landing in the St. Louis area in 1889. He paid his dues playing in local saloons and brothels, locales that were often the first places that new musicians could play and become noticed. His big “break” came when, in 1893, he played at some sporting arenas near the Columbian Exposition in Chicago. He received notice, and thus he formed an eight-member group, the Texas Medley, and spent the rest of the 1890s traveling and playing mostly nightclubs throughout the country. Joplin played a number of genres in his sets, but he always included some ragtime, which he most likely learned in St. Louis and was becoming popular in the U.S. at the time.

Joplin had begun to compose in the late 1890s, and almost all of his compositions were ragtime pieces. He issued his Maple Leaf Rag in 1899 as sheet music (the custom of the day for popular music), and it became his most famous and best-selling piece. His now national fame allowed him to experiment with more complex and innovative works, and he began to bring ragtime idioms into other forms of music, such as ballets and two operas that he completed in 1906 and 1911. The last of these, *Treemonisha*, was a work that was ambitious and wide in scope, one that celebrated the idea that education was the path to success and acceptance for African Americans. Joplin worked tirelessly to have *Treemonisha* successfully produced but failed. To make matters worse, the orchestration score was lost, and only the piano-vocal score remained; *Treemonisha* was never staged until the 1970s, after Joplin’s fame was revived with “The Entertainer” in *The Sting*.

Joplin had contracted syphilis sometime between 1910 and 1915, and by 1916 the disease, along with the stress and strain of trying to have his opera appear, took its toll. He was working on a full ragtime symphony when he died in April 1917. After that, he became largely forgotten until the inclusion of his music by arranger Marvin Hamlisch in *The Sting* revived his reputation. He posthumously won a Pulitzer Prize for *Treemonisha* in 1976. As for me, I only learned to play a very crude version of “The Entertainer,” but don’t ask me to do it now.

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