

“The Eighty-Six Years of Eubie Blake”--Eubie Blake (1969)

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Eubie Blake

The “Eighty-Six Years of Eubie Blake” was a landmark album, introducing Blake’s ragtime and Broadway music to an entirely new generation. In autumn 1967, music historian Dave Jasen approached John Hammond at Columbia Records urging him to record Blake. Dave arranged for a session to be held at Carl Seltzer’s home studio with Eubie and invited Hammond to attend. Hearing Eubie play, Hammond was sufficiently inspired to approach the pianist about recording. In February 1968, Blake reported to revival pianist Charlie Rasch that Hammond asked him to “record two L.P.[s], one ragtime and one semi classics.... Well, I will say I am supposed to record, I never believe anything Broadway says until I sign a contract. These records are suppose[d] to be documentary also.”

Eubie was right to be skeptical, as he had seen many deals evaporate over the decades even when he had signed a contract to perform the work. In fact, it would be just over a year later before any recordings were made. Eubie prepared carefully for the session, practicing pieces he hadn’t played in years. He wrote to Rasch again just before the sessions began:

John Hammond...has ordered two albums you know what that means—8 numbers a side, 32 numbers in all. And all but about 3 or 4 are my own composition. Some I haven’t played for 50 years like “Kitchen Tom,” “Poor Jimmy Green,” and many others. I just remember all of them right now.

In late February 1969, during a three-day session at Columbia’s studio, Hammond recorded a two-record set that would introduce Eubie to a new generation of fans. Realizing that Eubie was a natural performer, Hammond wisely invited an audience to the first sessions that were devoted

to Eubie's solo piano playing. This select audience encouraged Eubie's natural ebullience, which can be heard in his energetic playing and rapport with the audience.

When first brought in to record, Eubie was placed at the studio's workhorse piano. Noticing a much finer Steinway on the premises, Eubie asked if he could play it instead. Hammond said, "Well, that piano is reserved for Vladimir Horowitz," which only made Eubie more determined to play it. Hammond relented and the finer piano was used. Ironically, the only piece that had to be re-recorded was one where Eubie was hitting the keys so hard that he broke a string on Horowitz's piano!

Hammond encouraged Eubie to play pieces that had influenced his early style, including Jesse Pickett's "The Dream," the Latin-tinged "Spanish Venus," and Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag," along with Blake's own "Charleston Rag" and previously unrecorded early pieces like his "Baltimore Todolo" and "Kitchen Tom" (named for a cook he befriended at an Atlantic City club). He also recreated the folk-style rags and pop songs of his youth, including "Katie Red" and "Poor Jimmy Green." Eubie then played more recent pieces influenced by his Schillinger training, including "Eubie's Boogie," "Troublesome Ivories," and "Blue Rag in 12 Keys," which showed off his considerable harmonic mastery wedded to his ear for memorable melodies and his sophisticated sense of rhythm.

Blake also played his "Brittwood Rag" for this session. Eubie had taught this rag to his friend and fellow pianist Willie Gans sometime earlier in the century. He had totally forgotten the piece until he heard Gans playing it one night and asked him, "What is that rag? I've heard it but I don't know what it is," only to have Gans tell him that it was his own composition!

The remaining sessions were devoted to immortalizing Blake's Broadway songs. Not surprisingly, Noble Sissle was invited to sing on their first "hit," "It's All Your Fault," along with "You Were Meant for Me," and a medley of hits from "Shuffle Along." Sissle was still in good voice and gave some of his best recorded performances since the '20s. Eubie also played compositions from earlier African-American shows, including a medley of Cole and Johnson's "Bleeding Moon" and "Under the Bamboo Tree," and a medley of James P. Johnson's hits from "Runnin' Wild," including the ever-popular "Charleston."

"The Eighty-Six Years of Eubie Blake" was widely reviewed in the national press, with most of the reviews focusing on Eubie's still powerful playing despite his advanced years. It even got a rave notice in the pages of a nascent rock journal, "Rolling Stone." Critic Langdon Winner astutely said:

A natural tendency in writing about Eubie Blake is to emphasize how old the man is. It is indeed a remarkable fact that Eubie is eighty-six years old... But such information...conceals a very important fact. The newly recorded album by Blake is anything but a museum piece or a musical bauble to heighten the nostalgia. It is instead a very lively collection of songs which are fun to listen to in their own right. This man really *plays!*... The "Eighty-Six Years of Eubie Blake" gives us a fresh opportunity to hear the wonderful dexterity, subtlety and excitement of the ragtime masters....

Blake's techniques at the keyboard, especially his bass lines, are simply astounding. His chord changes, rhythms, and musical anecdotes are a delight... Seldom has musical history been so much fun.

Eubie made sure that friends and fellow musicians received copies of the album. One particularly gratifying note came from old friend Louis Armstrong, who wrote to Eubie after getting his copy:

I received the album ... and man it's beautiful... You are a born trouper. And no one can't take it away from you... So carry on, pal. You deserve every moment in music. The world and this day and age are very happy that we are still around.

Richard Carlin and Ken Bloom are the co-authors of "Eubie Blake: Rags, Rhythm, and Race," published in August 2020 by Oxford University Press.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the authors and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.