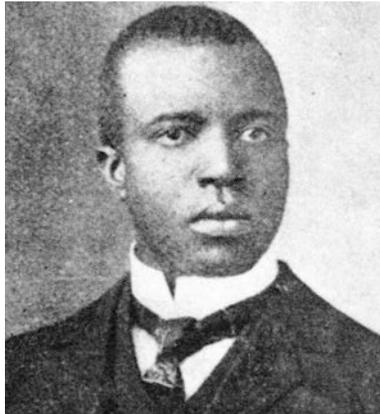


Ragtime compositions on piano rolls--Scott Joplin (1900s)

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Essay by Larry C. Melton (guest post)*



Scott Joplin

It is fitting that the seven piano rolls Joplin made a year before his death, were among the first recordings chosen for inclusion in the National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress.

Ragtime is often considered to be America's first truly popular music and there is also an important claim that it is our first classical music as well. Scott Joplin is usually considered *the* major ragtime composer based on the quality of his compositions and, specifically, his "Maple Leaf Rag," first published in Sedalia, Missouri (1899). There are no known audio recordings by Joplin.

By April of 1916, Scott Joplin only had one more year to live. He was desperately trying to maintain both his legacy and his livelihood as his mind and body struggled against the debilitating effects of syphilis.

The seven piano rolls likely reflect an effort to extract some income during this period. According to ragtime historian Bill Edwards, "Maple Leaf Rag" (1899) and "Magnetic Rag" (1914) were recorded in April 1916 at a Connorized studio with a marking master and then later punched. The following month, "Weeping Willow" (1903), "Something Doing" (1903), and "Pleasant Moments" (1909) were cut. In June, "Ole Miss Rag" by W.C. Handy, was made and in June, Joplin also recorded "Maple Leaf Rag" again on a Uni-Record label, punched master.

In his lifetime, "Maple Leaf Rag" was not only Scott Joplin's most popular composition, it had made him famous. His publishers were fond of referring to him as the "King of Ragtime Writers." In Sedalia, he was known as the "Entertainer."

Scott Joplin was born near Texarkana, Texas, about 1867. He was educated there, and his mother had him take piano instruction from Julius Weiss, a local German piano teacher. Joplin

left home as a teenager, itinerantly performing and publishing some early compositions as he traveled the country. He attended the 1893 Columbia Exposition in Chicago and, by the mid-1890s, he was in Sedalia, Missouri, and furthering his musical education at the George R. Smith College there. A local publisher, John Stark, had the wisdom to sign a royalty contract with Joplin for the “Maple Leaf Rag” in 1899 at his Sedalia store.

Stark moved to St. Louis in 1900 and Joplin followed him within a few months and continued composing. Joplin married in 1904 but lost his young wife to pneumonia just two months later. Stark and Joplin moved to New York around 1907 and Joplin soon became consumed with publishing and then having his opera “Treemonisha” performed.

By 1916, Joplin had married his second wife, Lottie Stokes Joplin. He had just spent a frustrating year promoting his opera without success. It had all been part of his quest to produce serious music to fulfill his ambition to become a European-style American classical composer. In fact, there is serious speculation that he had also produced a symphony and piano concerto in his final years of life but these compositions have never been located.

Much has been written about Joplin’s piano roll recordings. It is speculated that all but the Aeolian Uni-Record “Maple Leaf Rag” issue were probably heavily edited after Joplin cut the original master. In fact, well-known piano roll historian Douglas Henderson, has proposed that all of the Connorized rolls were actually cut and edited by staff arranger, William Axlmann. Joplin biographer Ed Berlin, however, suggests that Axlmann likely edited Joplin’s masters since parts of the recordings are not physically possible to be played by just one performer.

Thus, the final Uni-Record version is likely the most accurate reflection of Joplin’s keyboard ability. Unfortunately, it is poorly played as Joplin’s deteriorating motor skills undoubtedly impacted his performance. Joplin had enjoyed the reputation for being a good pianist, especially when playing his own compositions, something that is not fully evident on this roll.

When discussing piano roll play-back quality, authorities are always concerned with the impact of the play-back speed on tempo. After 1905, Joplin was known for printing, “Do not play this piece fast. It is never right to play ragtime fast,” on his published sheet music. However, this admonition is frequently ignored as Joplin obviously did on the Uni-Record roll. In addition, Joplin takes unusual liberties with his compositions in recording six of the seven rolls. The speeds the actual equipment used to make the piano rolls is also variable and the Connorized rolls by 1916 even had a disclaimer that play-back speeds might need to be adjusted. When Mike Montgomery helped Arnie Caplin record the Biograph series of piano roll records in the 1970s, Mike was meticulously careful to adjust the play-back speed of each recording based on his extensive experience with Joplin’s music.

As for the selection of the pieces Joplin recorded, “Maple Leaf Rag” was an obvious choice. “Magnetic Rag” had likely been his last rag published and it reflected his aspiration to produce genuine classical music. “Weeping Willow” may have been chosen for its emotional quality while “Something Doing” was a lighter, cake-walk style two-step, co-written with Scott Hayden. “Pleasant Moments” is a waltz more heavily syncopated. Collectively, these rolls are a good cross section of Joplin’s ragtime style and classical greatness.

The reason Joplin made the piano roll of “Ole Miss Rag,” written by W.C. Handy, has long been a mystery, and Handy affords no clue in his autobiography. However, a 1952 letter to Charles Hanna, at the “Great Falls Montana Tribune,” indicates that Handy had great respect and appreciation for Joplin’s genius and thus may have asked the great ragtime composer to make the piano roll.

Handy may have been acquainted with Joplin in Sedalia while Handy was performing with Mahara’s Minstrels in September 1899, less than a month after “Maple Leaf Rag” was published. The two composers may have also met in New York after Handy arrived there in 1915.

We have very few actual documents or artifacts directly associated with Scott Joplin. Only a few signatures and annotations bear his handwriting and only three known photographs exist. Thus, the seven piano rolls attributed to him are perhaps our best material reminders of America’s great composer.

In 1974, at the first Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival in Sedalia, Missouri, America’s second and third generation ragtime performers gathered with their admirers where Joplin had performed 70 plus years before. There were many exciting experiences during that festival, but a climactic moment came in a concert dedicated to Joplin’s music. Richard Zimmerman, the artistic director, had the house darkened and a single spotlight lit a lone piano on the stage. After a brief silence, the old piano began playing Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag” piano roll. When the last note sounded, the audience was stunned to silence and then erupted in gales of cheering applause. For those few moments, the “Entertainer” had once more enthused an audience from the tiny holes in a roll of paper now forever enshrined in our National Recording Registry.

Larry Melton was founder of the Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival in Sedalia, Missouri; it continues to this day. Melton also curates the Sedalia Ragtime Archive which began, in 1976, around his collection and he conducts research and writes on Sedalia history and ragtime topics. He currently lives in Union, Missouri and has been retired 18 years from his career as a community college history teacher.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.