Chandani Ramkishun

Professor Hoffman

IDC

October 14, 2016

King Joplin

Scott Joplin is a renowned musician from the late 19 and early 20th century. Joplin especially had his influence over the ragtime industry. Ragtime, unlike jazz and other genres, has a distinctiveness of its own. Ragtime can be defined as “musical composition for the piano, generally in duple meter and containing a highly syncopated treble lead over a rhythmically steady bass. A ragtime composition is usually composed three or four contrasting sections or strains, each one being 16 or 32 measures in length” (History of Ragtime). Ragtime is syncopated music, which means that the beats in the music follow an irregular beat or rhythm, or are “ragged”. The syncopated rhythms found in the best rags were meant to evoke a looseness, natural flow, and drive recreated by reading and performing the music exactly as written” (History of Ragtime).

Ragtime began prominently in the 1890s and throughout the 1900s. It spread rapidly in the southern and Midwestern states. Ragtime is composed for listening not for dancing. Instead ragtime syncopation had more of an animal dance to it, such as the grizzly bear, bunny hug, and turkey trot (History of Ragtime). It requires a high standard of pianistic ability.

What distinguishes ragtime from other American music is that it has misplaced beats. Composers use loose boundaries which made the music exciting. On the other hand, many Americans associated the missed beats with the African American population. There were high tensions between negroes and whites in the United States. The rising and aspiring musicians in ragtime were African America which intimated white musicians. Ragtime had a “strong connotation to the low class Negro music in brothels and saloons” (History of Ragtime). Joplin was able to overcome the battle against his skin color to produce some of the greatest ragtime compositions.

Scott Joplin was born in 1868 in Texas to Giles and Florence Joplin. His father was a laborer and his mother a cleaner. He was one of six children. Joplin came from a musical family. His father played the violin and his mother sang and performed on the banjo. From the early age of six, Joplin started to learn to play the piano on his mother’s boss’s piano. Joplin also took lessons from Julius Weiss. Having a strong musical background, Joplin began to perform during his high school years. He played the violin, the cornet, and sang. Around the 1880s, Joplin moved around and when he was in St. Louis, he was introduced to Tom Turpin, a ragtime musician. Joplin’s style of music was distinctive as it was composed of waltz and African American rhythms and melodies. Joplin’s biggest encouragement came from Otis Saunders who heard him play at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. Joplin was playing the cornet with his band when Saunders spotted him. Saunders told Joplin to continue to write music and spontaneously thrill the audience.

In 1894, Joplin moved to Sedalia, Missouri and taught music to who would become famous musicians such as Arthur Marshall, Scott Hayden, and Brun Campbell (Public Domain Review). He also played in the Queen City Cornet Band at local shows. Joplin started to publish his own music in 1895. Joplin started attending music school in 1896 at George R. Smith. With his music education, Joplin was able to convert musical notes into actual melodies. He changed ragtime history when music store owner John Stark published Joplin’s composition, “Maple Leaf Rag” for fifty dollars plus royalties in 1899 (Encyclopedia of Arkansas). Maple Leaf Rag became an instant hit and still remains the lasting footprint Joplin made in the music industry. “By 1914 "Maple Leaf Rag" had sold 1 million copies and Stark had amassed over 50 rags in his catalog” (History of Ragtime).

From this song, Joplin was crowned with the title, “King of Ragtime” (The State Historical Society of Missouri).

In 1901, the newly married Joplin and Belle Jones moved to St. Louis to further build on Joplin’s success. With his presence, long with many other famous musicians, John Stark, Hayden and Campbell, St. Louis became the primary location for this style of music. While in St. Louis, a European conductor, Alfred Ernst. Joplin composed a ballet and the opera, “The Guest of Honor” (1903) which proved to be unsuccessful.

In this time period, Joplin had struggles to make it big in the music industry. The discrimination against black musicians limited his opportunities. Joplin was not included with white musicians and often enough, could not raise the funds he needed to produce more music. He was only allowed to play his music in shows where only African American musicians were (The State Historical Society of Missouri).

After a shortly lived marriage, Joplin divorced his first wife and married Freddie Alexander. Unfortunately, she passed away shortly after from pneumonia. In 1907, Joplin moved to New York City in hopes of building a stronger music career. In New York, Joplin had greater opportunities and was able to go back to writing music. Joplin still maintained in contact with Stark who had also moved to the city. He remarried a second time to Lottie Stokes. In 1915, Joplin opened his second opera, Treemonisha. However, his second opera was also unsuccessful. Shortly after, Joplin got sick and could not compose and perform music anymore. In 1916, he suffered from syphilis and dementia (Public Domain Review). He was discouraged and did not have much money. He died on April 1, 1917.

Although Joplin had an untimely death and died poor, his legacy and imprint made ragtime history. Joplin had his unsuccessful moments but he laid a foundation for ragtime music. Joplin’s music led a pathway for jazz. His breakthrough in ragtime allowed for other black musicians to gain several opportunities as well. Joplin’s “The Entertainer” became a popular hit after it was featured in the 1973 film, “The Sting” (The State Historical Society of Missouri). Scott Joplin’s Maple Leaf Rag made history for African American musicians and Ragtime artists.

Works Cited

"History of Ragtime." *Performing Arts Encyclopedia, Library of Congress*. Web. 20 Sept. 2016. <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.200035811/default.html>.

"Scott Joplin (1868?–1917) - Encyclopedia of Arkansas."  Web. 20 Sept. 2016. <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=527>.

"Scott Joplin." *The Public Domain Review*. Web. 20 Sept. 2016. <http://publicdomainreview.org/collections/scott-joplin/>.

“Scott Joplin”. The State Historical Society of Missouri. Web. 20 Sept. 2016.

<<http://shsmo.org/historicmissourians/name/j/joplin/> >