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Ragtime: Historic, Dynamic, and Influential

Considered a fundamental precursor of Jazz, the musical style dubbed “Ragtime” was one of the most dominant genres of its twenty year reign in America’s ever-changing artistic scene. The genre prevailed as a fresh interpretation of popular music in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Captivated by entirely unique ideas and elements, the US Mainstream grew fond of the nationally flourishing music, resulting in unparalleled success for ragtime composers and performers.

The history of Ragtime’s rise and reign in America tells a short, yet complex narrative. Many argue that Ragtime was entirely separate from Jazz as a musical genre, withering in popularity and facing a silent death during the 1920s. Others claim its popularity never ceased; rather, Ragtime was a style of Jazz that simply matured into the modern genres associated with Jazz. Opposing arguments aside, it must be agreed that Ragtime’s rich history and technical nuances cradled the future music that would define the United States for the first half of the twentieth century.

The genre’s emergence from two closely related sources--Euro-American dance music and Afro-American folk dance music--represents its critical upbringing within distinct social boundaries (Floyd and Reisser, 22). The latter source is crucial when discussing the origins of Ragtime.

During the prevalence of slavery in the United States, a custom involving social dancing became an integral part of these early musical developments. Black slaves and free musicians

would perform for the entertainment of white landowners (Floyd and Reisser, 23). The accommodations of slaves in these musical displays nurtured the traditional African aspects, displaying them through these dance movements. One writer had lamented that “ ‘congos’ were danced, and when the music grew fast and furious, a jig [or rag] would wind up the evening” (Floyd and Reisser, 23).

Black folk music, similar to prior social dance movements, played an integral part in the development of Ragtime. The performing tradition and notated music of the style allowed for the integration of syncopation--melodic accents between the backbeat--as a special feature of black folk music and minstrel shows (Dickinson, 65). At the heart of African American folk traditions were ideas expressed throughout the minstrel shows, spreading their qualities despite the ulterior motives behind the shows.

Elements of African rhythms made their way into African-American folk music. The use of additive rhythms in duple, triple, and hemiola patterns is the hallmark of rhythmic organization (Floyd and Reisser, 24). The hand clapping accompaniments of many traditional African songs mirrored these rhythms that had become prevalent in early Ragtime compositions. One such example was the “habanera” rhythmic pattern that had developed from African influences in Cuba--the polyrhythmic features of West and Central African technique (Floyd and Reisser, 26). The composition “Solace,” by the most prominent artist in Ragtime, Scott Joplin, used the “habanera” rhythm in its chord progressions.

Various references to the banjo, one of the most prominent mediums for Ragtime, suggests that the African-derived traditions made possible the emergence of the new style. Black banjo tradition consisted of additive rhythm through the form of syncopation. In Ragtime’s more

common instrument, piano, the right hand syncopation had been mirrored by the banjo. The cross rhythm generated by the bass string working against the higher melody strings influenced the “oom-pah” left hand of the piano and the improvisational syncopations of the right hand (Floyd and Reisser, 34).

The emergence of cakewalk music in the late nineteenth century furthered the development of Ragtime into its more mature stages. It is probable that the cakewalk genre represented a black folk/popular version of marches originating from Euro-American influences instead of ancestral African musical traditions. The syncopated “two-steps” and coon songs of cakewalk had surprising similarities to classic Ragtime (Floyd and Reisser, 34).

Every fundamental characteristic of Ragtime can be attributed to these historical origins. Stemming from earlier genres were the sectional designs, straight bass, multimetric pentatonic-like melodies, polyrhythms, and treble-bass polarities of Ragtime compositions. They are usually composed of five sections, often with the thematic format ABACD (Floyd and Reisser, 36). The first three, ABA, are presented in a tonic key, while the latter are in the key of the subdominant (Floyd and Reisser, 36). Each section is divided by melodic structures, consisting of a two-phrased statement and its varied repetition. The chord progression is repeated in the second progression but in an altered form. The right hand arpeggiates each of the chord progressions, creating a “ragged rhythm.” This can be described as “pivoting “ around a fixed set of notes, which could have originated from banjo ragtime compositions.

Surrounding these complex structures hidden within the “jumpy” nature of Ragtime was the most important figure in the genre--Scott Joplin. He may well have defined the style perfectly when he first played his compositions on piano. By performing at the 1893 World

Columbian Exchange in Chicago, he began the craze associated with Americans' fascination with Ragtime, allowing it to become nationally famous.

Two of Joplin's most famous compositions, "Maple Leaf Rag" and "The Entertainer" represent the various features of classic ragtime persisting through later genres of music. The presence of "characteristic rhythmic cells" found only in African American musical influences are present in the composition, "Maple Leaf Rag." In other words, they are the characteristics solely of "black Ragtime" (Floyd and Reisser, 46).

The continuous tempo of Maple Leaf Rag from the beginning to the end of the piece establishes the overall element of time. The repetition of off-beat melodic phrasing allows the stressed beats to fall separately, undisturbed by a completely separate backbeat. About twenty to thirty seconds into the song, there is a clear shift in melody; Joplin makes these distinguishable through the heavy syncopation (McDaniel 2015). Joplin uses a variety of phrases, consisting of four notes in the basic phrase, later repeating one of the notes, typically the first one to add off-beat phrasing (McDaniel 2015). This pattern results in a wide range of notes that is prevalent from start to finish. Each section accompanies a series of layers that work together to establish a rhythm perpetuated by call and response of the following chord progression.

Stemming from a heavy Scott Joplin influence, James Scott--the Crown Prince of Ragtime--emerged in the music scene. He was later recognized as the second most widely known and influential ragtime piano player and composer. Of his lesser known works, "Valse Venice," Scott exuded a smoothly professional and accomplished tone through a waltz rather than a ragtime piece. Similar to his former compositions was the multi sectional nature of "Valse Venice" divided into sections and organized like prior ragtime marches. Though a piece

thoroughly associated with Ragtime, the waltz evoked the gentility of Victorian America--far on the conservative side of the popular music spectrum.

The social implications of Ragtime strongly correlate with James Scott and his need to please a conservative following in popular music. The genre received harsh criticism. Victorian era elites looked down upon music that had been historically “African American” dominated, despite its boom in popularity with younger generations. Its vibrant style, however, appealed to Americans seeking new concepts in music, regardless of race and social-status relations.

Particularly the dances associated with Ragtime music led harsh critique to the participators of the style. Groups composed of conservative followers of music assembled to watch over brothels and saloons--the primary outlets of Ragtime performers and audiences. One such group, the Committee of Fourteen, was exceptionally attentive to detail when describing the dances as “objectively” as possible. The investigators’ moral disdain for ragtime dancing came across strongly, referring to dance halls as “dives of the worst kind” containing “degenerates” dancing in “vicious, rotten, and obscene” manner (Robinson 95). Only visualizing a “sexually” dance style with “repulsive” hip movements, the Committee of Fourteen represented a plethora of individuals that had scorned Ragtime for superficial and social reasons.

It is essential to note that the exact same response to Ragtime was repeated with the popularization of Jazz, furthering each respective genre’s similarities between the other. Frequently referred to as the “Devil’s Music,” Jazz, the liberating and sensuous music (mirroring Ragtime) faced harsh criticism (Culture Shock, 2000). Campaigns to censor the music prevailed over the music--Thomas Edison ridiculed Jazz, claiming it would sound better backwards, while Jazz theater construction was halted in Cincinnati by an interest group.

The fundamental reasons for the hatred toward Jazz mirror the implications of Ragtime on the American public. Improvisation over a traditional structure, the spotlight of the performer as opposed to the composer, and African American prevalence in the genre steered conservatives away from the acceptance of “barbaric and immoral” style (Culture Shock, 2000).

Yet both Ragtime and Jazz played on.

The former’s triumph over societal scorn allowed for the transition of syncopated rhythms to swung syncopation with greater improvisation. A prominent style resembling the middleman of this transaction was stride, honky tonk, and boogie woogie piano.

Jelly Roll Morton, one of the founding pianists of Jazz, was crucial in introducing more modern Jazz elements to Ragtime compositions, ultimately resulting in the birth of a new genre. He performed his compositions even when the two styles overlapped, simply adding swing to the syncopated rhythms of his compositions. Though undoubtedly an outlandish claim that he was the sole creator of Jazz, there is merit in his statement considering these contributions. Likewise, Duke Ellington used Ragtime melodies and added improvisation. Sticking to a steady beat and syncopation allowed the preservation of Ragtime’s elements in his Jazz performances.

A prime example of Ragtime influences in later Jazz lies in the heart of many cities in the midwestern United States. A look at Kansas reveals a significant narrative. The intricate melodies and hot syncopations, especially those of the frequenting hometown hero, Scott Joplin, offered an excellent foundation for many young musicians (Pearson 184). Early recordings of Kansas City Jazz Bands were actually ragtime pieces, as were many compositions from other Jazz Bands attempting to swing Ragtime for the purpose of change in feel.

There stood the unique alterations of Ragtime, creating a new genre of music identifiable today as Jazz.

Annotated Bibliography

Culture Shock: The TV Series and Beyond: The Devil's Music: 1920's Jazz.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/beyond/jazz.html>. Accessed 13 Nov. 2019.

Through an explanation of the various controversies of Jazz in America, the article is able to elaborate upon Jazz's lack of widespread acceptance throughout the middle and upper class. The discussion of the censorship of Jazz relates to the social attitudes towards a style of music that had been historically claimed as having half its influences from African roots. Its growth in popularity was able to empower African Americans despite their legal inequalities. Similar to ragtime are the social implications of later Jazz. They mirror each other's rise as social "fads" that had been discriminated against and looked down upon by the upper class. They both eventually became the most popular styles of music, for their respective times, in American history.

Dickinson, Peter. "The Achievement of Ragtime: An Introductory Study with Some Implications for British Research in Popular Music." *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, vol. 105, 1978, pp. 63–76. JSTOR.

This article of the journal *The Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* examines the social influences and implications of ragtime concerning the traditional aspects of ragtime. Rooted in African and African-American ancestry, the tradition of ragtime was often passed down orally until the music reached notation--especially important when considering the European influences of ragtime. The discussion of how the folk tradition remained gives further insights into how the style empowered African

Americans in the realm of music, mirroring their climb through the social status with the onset of Jazz decades later.

Pearson, Nathan W. "Political and Musical Forces That Influenced the Development of Kansas City Jazz." *Black Music Research Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1989, pp. 181–92. JSTOR, doi:10.2307/779422.

This chapter from the *Black Music Research Journal* discusses the direct influences of ragtime on Jazz, specifically Kansas City Jazz. Kansas City had primarily been considered as the birthplace of classical ragtime, later breathing life to Jazz that heavily resembled the earlier ragtime genre. Through extensive discussions of hot syncopation and brass bands, the text is able to pinpoint the direct influences that ragtime had on early Jazz prevalent through the Kansas and Midwestern region. The inclusion of the elaborations of strong beat rhythms associated with Kansas City Jazz further ragtime's influences on Jazz.

Robinson, Danielle. "Performing American: Ragtime Dancing as Participatory Minstrelsy." *Dance Chronicle*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2009, pp. 89–126. JSTOR.

This chapter of the book *Dance Chronicle* examines the relationship between ragtime and its influences specifically from dancing. The ragtime craze had been initiated from the onset of the "cakewalk" and "two-step" dancing styles during the late nineteenth century. Also discussed are the social influences and implications of ragtime. Despite its quick rise in popularity, the social responses to ragtime were not entirely positive. Conservative Victorian-era elites viewed the style of music with its relation to ragtime dancing that incorporated "vulgar" movements. Considered a "fad," ragtime was

considered dangerous and immoral to the American youth that had become infatuated by it. Explanations of various primary accounts reveal a hatred towards ragtime.

Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., and Marsha J. Reisser. "Social Dance Music of Black Composers in the Nineteenth Century and the Emergence of Classic Ragtime." *The Black Perspective in Music*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1980, pp. 161–93. JSTOR, JSTOR, doi:10.2307/1214050.

This article of *The Black Perspective in Music* gives a comprehensive explanation of the emergence of ragtime through the spread of its influences, occurring in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America. Discussing social dance changes reveals the acceptance of African and African-American rhythmic ideas and patterns in contemporary music. The rhythmic aspects of ragtime are addressed and furthered to understand the geographical influences on ragtime, ranging from a wide variety of locations in the Western Hemisphere. The precursors to ragtime, banjo syncopation and cakewalk, are elaborated upon, giving reasons behind ragtime's unique stylistic qualities. After an extensive examination of ragtime precursors and their implications on the stylistic aspects of ragtime, the article analyzes specific works by famous ragtime composers, Scott Joplin, James Scott, and Tom Turpin.

"*Maple Leaf Rag*" *Scott Joplin* | *Music Class*.

<https://blog.mcdaniel.edu/qlykens/2015/02/26/maple-leaf-rag-scott-joplin/>. Accessed 14 Nov. 2019.

This blog gives an in-depth analysis of one of the most popular Ragtime compositions ever written, "Maple Leaf Rag." Performed by Scott Joplin, this composition was responsible for the Ragtime craze that had begun during the early 1900s

in the American artistic scene. This article examines the tempo changes, shifts in melody throughout the piece, as well as the various layers for each section and phrase that result in a syncopated masterpiece.