



New World Records

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Maple Leaf Rag: Ragtime in Rural America New World NW235

Ragtime is essentially a late nineteenth- early twentieth-century American musical phenomenon that has influenced virtually every popular idiom in American music. Ragtime's unique syncopation has developed far beyond mere piano solos, and its range extends vividly and spectacularly from country blues to jazz, from white and black string-bands and novelty players to vaudeville and opera.

The *Larousse Encyclopédia of Music* (1971) offers the following definition: "Ragtime is an early type of classical jazz, often for the piano, a rag being a piece of music in this idiom." A rather terse oversimplification, the definition hardly even suggests the breadth of the idiom, let alone the varied approaches that have emanated from the basic style.

The famed nonagenarian ragtime pianist and composer Eubie Blake offers a much broader definition. He feels that ragtime has once again become a popular mass music "because it had all the best things in music: rhythm, melody and syncopation." To this he adds, "Anything that is syncopated is basically ragtime. I don't care whether it's Liszt's 'Hungarian Rhapsody' or Tchaikovsky in his 'Waltz of Flowers.'" This from a man who has been an active ragtime pianist and composer since before the beginning of the twentieth century. David Jasen, an excellent contemporary ragtime scholar and pianist, is far more precise as well as more restrictive in his definitions of ragtime. In the introduction to his discography he states: "Ragtime is the syncopation of an entire melodic strain combined with a continuously even rhythm." Rudi Blesh, the foremost ragtime scholar extant, adds:

Ragtime is mainly distinguished from most other music by its use of the rhythm loosely called syncopation. The really unique thing about ragtime when it appeared was the way the pianist opposed syncopation (or accents on the weak and normally unaccented second and third beats of the measure) in his right hand against a precise and regularly accented bass.

The purpose of presenting these definitions is to attempt to demonstrate that "ragtime" has been broadly interpreted, that the style, after its structured beginnings in the classic ragtime forms of Scott Joplin, has undergone a transformation since its inception and first peak of popularity.

For chronological and developmental purposes, it may be said that ragtime appeared as we know it today at the end of the nineteenth century. Ragtime developed from native American folk forms. It was fostered in bars and brothels where it was played on banjos and pianos. It was heard in the first movie theaters, through the piano accompaniments to silent motion pictures. It was performed and listened to on parlor pianos, player pianos, early phonographs, and Edison cylinder machines. It received wide distribution through large sheet-music sales. And it was as comfortable played by "professors" in houses of ill-repute as it was by families at home.

The United States in the last decade of the nineteenth century was largely a rural society. The period was the pre-dawn of a new America that moved rapidly toward a highly industrialized and mechanized society as well as toward a more urbanized environment

for much of the population. Although an increased desire for urbanization was very much in evidence, rural lifestyles still prevailed (it has only been since the end of World War II that urban and rural existences really began to meld).

In the rural areas traditions are strong and long-lasting. What has come to be called "traditional" music represents an amalgam of early folk idioms (with roots chiefly in Britain and Africa) with popular Tin Pan Alley forms, encouraged by the 78-rpm phonograph record and early radio broadcasts. Musical traditions extending back to the sources were widely diffused throughout the rural areas, and were (and still are) the heart and soul of the music heard and played by rural Americans. Although these people were, perhaps, not directly within the mainstream of American life (if one equates "mainstream" with "urban"), their separateness was only partial.

Itinerant musicians who traveled between urban and rural areas carried the new musical sounds with them, and their efforts were aided by the advent of radio—even the poorest families seemed able to afford a radio—which immeasurably broadened their audience and their own exposure to other performers. Phonograph records as well as musical instruments were sold by mail, and the rural musician's initial instrument was often a Sears Roebuck-catalogue mail-order item. Records were not only sold door to door by traveling salesmen but were also stocked by local general stores. These discs offered listeners everything from blues and country music to the latest commercial hits, jazz, novelties, and the popular saccharine ballads of the day.

In rural America music was a family, church, and community affair. Little other entertainment was available in those areas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Musical instruments were often played by even the very young, because making music offered one of the few forms of diversion available in the home. It was not unusual to find literally all members of a large family proficient as string players and also adept at a variety of secular and religious vocal styles. String bands, square dances, "sooky-jumps" (a type of dance), and folk-music interchanges were part of daily life. In addition, as we have observed, urban influences were also absorbed, expanded, and in many ways improved on.

Rural musicians incorporated ragtime and other contemporaneous musical styles into their standard repertoire to keep pace with new musical challenges. There exists, therefore, a rich store of recorded ragtime performed by rural musicians.

During the 1920s and 1930s a great many on-the-spot recordings were made by the commercial companies. In many instances field trips were undertaken after an extensive scouting effort. The selected talent would be taken to a convenient city (such as Atlanta, Memphis, or Dallas) to be recorded. The equipment was generally set up at a hotel or radio station, and recordings were generally made almost nonstop over several days. In one day a company might record a jazz band or two as well as several string bands and soloists, black as well as white.

Record-company regional salesmen acted as talent scouts. They employed many methods in their search, including advertising in local newspapers and on radio, and even organized talent contests. Although performers' pay was generally minimal (and royalties very rare), many records were made. Many of these became quite popular. They made an effective calling card and selling aid for the ambitious musician.

Often, after the release of the recording, these rural artists would begin to tour, performing for a set fee, and it was common for them to sell their records at these appearances. It may thus be seen that the records themselves completed a peculiar though logical cycle: rural performers learned new songs and musical styles from records and subsequently made records of their own, performing their own material, which often interpreted and interpolated much of the newer material they themselves had heard on records. This is not intended to suggest that these rural artists offered absolutely no original material; rather, they absorbed into their tradition many of the external popular influences of their day.

To appreciate why rural musicians seized on ragtime, we must consider the preragtime, prerecorded forms of American folk music, such as those that the composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829-1869) heard and incorporated into his works. Dance tunes, ballads, Creole melodies, and other folk music that existed thanks to an active oral tradition greatly influenced not only Gottschalk but also, later, the great black ragtime composer Scott Joplin (1868-1917), who knew these forms when he began to compose his classic ragtime masterpieces. Joplin's compositions became nationwide hits, and the sheet music for the *Maple Leaf Rag* and other gems sold at a fantastic rate; the volume of sales of his works would be considered overwhelming even by today's standards. They were sold all over the United States in rural as well as urban areas. Much of the appeal of this then new music was attributable to its basic familiarity, and the response it elicited from rural folk was partly a reaction to sounds they had been hearing for many years, although in a much less structured form.

Joplin's rags in particular (for there were a number of other capable composers in the genre) and jazz in general—rhythmically and melodically—influenced the music of a number of pioneering serious composers. The American composer George Gershwin's work is permeated with these styles, and Debussy, Ravel, Stravinsky, and a few others paid serious attention to the new idioms.

While Joplin was at the height of his success, country musicians were translating and extending the ragtime idiom on many types of string instruments, including mandolin and guitar. In fact, the basic form was substantially transformed by the guitar, which became popular in rural areas at the start of the twentieth century. Previously, the favored folk instrument had been the five-string banjo and its various relatives such as the tenor banjo and the six-string banjo-guitar. But in the 1900s the standard six-string guitar was being developed rurally into an instrument capable of acting like

a miniband, the thumb accenting bass lines while the other fingers pick the melody on the upper strings. When ragtime was played on guitars, mandolins, auto-harps, harmonicas, jugs, washboards, and other less orthodox instruments, a newer, less structured ragtime sound was born. The musical form and content of ragtime lent itself beautifully to predominantly joyful rural musical philosophies.

By 1920 ragtime in the classic Joplin sense was all but dead. Thereafter jazz and commercial music prevailed in urban America. But the more extended uses of the idiom were still maintained in the rural areas, up to the beginning of World War II and even to this day.

Although the rural ragtime tradition has continued at a relatively constant level, the classically based urban ragtime approach has had two distinct revivals since

1920. The first took place around 1939 in San Francisco, with Lu Watters and his Yerba Buena Jazz Band the catalyst. The second revival has taken place within the past few years. Its impetus has primarily been the phenomenally successful Hollywood motion picture *The Sting*, whose score featured adaptations of Joplin rags and brought the sound of ragtime to an extremely large audience. Ragtime had by no means been dead during the interim in the larger cities; there has always been a handful of die-hard practitioners as well as a coterie of devoted and loyal listeners. But city people's awareness of ragtime—as both listeners and performers—has generally, save for the peak periods, been far lower than that of rural Americans.

Side One: Black Tradition

Dallas Rag
DALLAS STRING BAND

The Dallas String Band was led by Coley Jones and was, according to blues historian Paul Oliver, a "serenading group. They played on the streets to white crowds, at dance functions, and wherever they could find employment, using their skill at mastering a variety of instruments to meet popular demand, and playing blues for Negro functions."

2. Southern Rag
BLIND BLAKE

Blind Blake, perhaps the most outstanding and gifted of all ragtime guitarists, was originally from Florida and became legendary as a performer on the east coast of the United States. He played piano as well and was a superlative blues accompanist. He died sometime during the 1960s.

3. Dew Drop Alley
SUGAR UNDERWOOD

Virtually nothing is known about Sugar Underwood. He assumed a supporting role in a couple of other records, but the magnificent *Davis Street*

Blues and Dew Drop Alley appear to be his only solo musical statements on records.

4. Piccolo Rag
BLIND BOY FULLER

Blind Boy Fuller (Fulton Allen) was born around 1903 in South Carolina and died in 1940 in a hospital after a kidney operation. He recorded more than one hundred twenty sides, in most cases accompanying himself on a National steel-bodied resonator guitar of extreme volume. At one time he made several sides with Rev. Gary Davis, who often said that he taught Fuller practically everything he knew about guitar playing.

5. Atlanta Rag
COW COW DAVENPORT

Charles "Cow Cow" Davenport was born in Alabama in 1894 and died in Ohio in 1955. According to John Chilton, "He began studying at a theological school, but was expelled for playing ragtime piano." Davenport was active as a vaudeville performer with various singers and was well known as a ragtime/blues/barrel-house piano player. His "ragged" *Atlanta Rag* is a typically jagged rural ragtime per-

formance.

6. Kill It Kid
BLIND WILLIE MCTELL

Blind Willie McTell, born in Statesboro, Georgia, in 1898, date of death unknown, was a magnificent twelve-string-guitar player, singer, and songwriter who was a folkster in the truest tradition. He was equally at home in blues, ragtime, novelty songs, and every other musical idiom he tackled, all of which took on a special life through his personalized treatment. He recorded for a number of commercial companies, as well as for the Library of Congress in 1940.

7. The Entertainer
BUNK JOHNSON AND HIS BAND

Bunk Johnson was born in 1879 and died in 1949. His greatest fame as a New Orleans jazz trumpeter was achieved through rediscovery, as a result of renewed interest in traditional jazz, in the late 1930s. It is perhaps just slightly extending our rural-ragtime concept to include a New Orleans-style band playing a Scott Joplin rag. However, the entire feeling of the recording is rural. It was made as a result of the first rag-

time revival mentioned above, and one can imagine hearing this kind of band approach to ragtime in rural America during the twenties and thirties.

8. Maple Leaf Rag REV. GARY DAVIS

One of the most remarkable guitar pickers ever, Gary Davis (1896-1972) had an almost limitless repertoire of older musical styles. Welly Trice, a contemporary of Davis, recently described him as follows:

I met Gary in 1931 in Durham at the White House - that's the place they have tobacco sales. One night me and a friend picked him up and carried him out to the country. Gary was the fastest man I ever heard. I never heard a man pick a string like Gary. You might find somebody make some of his chords, hut you don't find anybody pick a string like Gary. [Blind Boy] Fuller used to say, "All of us boys can play, Willy [sic], but Gary is our Daddy!" He called him the Daddy because he was the Daddy of the guitar players, not because he was older than us.

Davis played marches and ragtime in the finger style mentioned earlier. His version of "Maple Leaf Rag" is indicative of all we have tried to point out in investigating the expansion of the classic ragtime style.

Side Two: White Tradition

1. Mexican Rag JIMMIE TARLTON

Jimmie Tarlton was born in 1892. He plays a steel guitar lapstyle, like the Hawaiian guitarists, and is a magnificent instrumentalist as well as a convincing singer. Partnered with guitarist Tom Darby, he had a two-sided hit record in

the late 1920s *Columbus Stockade Blues* and *Birmingham Jail*.

2. Hawkins Rag GID TANNER *and* HIS SKILLET LICKERS

Gid Tanner (1885-1960) was from Georgia. He and his Skillet Lickers were among the most respected string bands. Members of his group included the fiddler Clayton McMichen, the blind guitarist Riley Puckett, and the fivestring-banjo player Fate Norris. All these men were vastly influential in rural string-band music. The fruit of their many recordings was made as early as 1924.

3. Guitar Rag HARVEY *and* JOHNSON

Very little is known about Jess Johnson. Roy Harvey was originally a railroad engineer from Beckley, West Virginia. He turned to music as an occupation after being blackballed by the railroad for having participated in a strike in 1923. He was a member of the legendary Charlie Poole's group.

4. Chinese Rag THE SPOONEY FIVE

Nothing is known about the Spooney Five.

5. Barn Dance Rag BILL BOYD *and* HIS COWBOY RAMBLERS

Bill Boyd and His Cowboy Ramblers, formed by brothers Bill and Jim Boyd in Greenville, Texas, in 1928, were very active during the 1930s and 40s. Much like Bob Wills and his group, they were a full band whose repertoire extended from ragtime and blues to jazz, country tunes, and dance numbers.

6. Sumter Rag/Steel Guitar Rag CHINA POPLIN

China Poplin, a truly rural musician, is the patriarch of a North Carolina family thoroughly immersed in old-time country music. The Poplin family offers an excellent example of contemporary popular idioms reshaped to suit a group's particular musical approach.

7. Cannon Ball Rag/Bugle Call Rag MERLE TRAVIS

Merle Travis, perhaps the finest country guitar player around, has had a broad and varied career, starting at age twenty in the late 1930s on radio station WLW in Cincinnati. His style of playing, called "Travis picking," has become enormously influential, and even dominant, in the country folk, country blues, and ragtime areas. At fifty-five, Travis is still active. He is probably best known for compositions like "Sixteen Tons," "So Round, So Firm, So Fully Packed," and "Smoke, Smoke, Smoke (That Cigarette)."

8. Randy Lynn Rag FLATT *and* SCRUGGS *and* the FOGGY MOUNTAIN BOYS

Lester Flatt (born 1914) and Earl Scruggs (born 1924) were active as a team from 1948 to 1969 and have long been associated with traditional and bluegrass music. As a musician, Scruggs has exerted a good deal of influence. His three-finger five-string-banjo-picking style—called, not surprisingly, "Scruggs style"—has shaped all contemporary country-style five-string-banjo playing since he appeared on the scene.

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- Cotton, Elizabeth*. Folkways 31003.
- Davis, Blind Gary*. Stinson SLP 56; Fantasy 24704; Prestige 7725; (live). Kicking Mule KM 101; *1935-1945*. Yazoo 1023; *Ragtime Guitar*. Kicking Mule KM 106.
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Skillet Lickers. County 526.

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Stripling Brothers. County 401.

Tanner, Gid, and the Skillet Lickers. Rounder 1005.

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Western Swing, Vol. 1. Old Timey X105; Vol. 2. Old Timey X116; Vol. 3. Old Timey X117.

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RURAL AMERICA: THE FARM SITUATION, 1914-1938

- 1914 May 8.** Smith-Lever Act provided for cooperation in agricultural extension work between the Department of Agriculture and land-grant colleges in the states.
- 1914-1918** Increased world demand for wheat as result of World War I prompted much-increased production, extending even to the Great Plains region. Farmers prospered during wartime, and the index of farm prices reached 208 in 1918, as compared with 100 in 1914.
- 1916 July 17.** Federal Farm Loan Act. Through twelve federal farm loan banks distributed throughout the country, farmers received long-term loans at low interest rates.
- 1921-1933** Depression in agriculture. Prices of farm products went down during the 1920s, never rising above level of 149.
- 1924 August 24.** Agricultural Credits Act granted loans to farm cooperatives to forestall dumping of surplus produce at low prices.
- 1929 June 15.** Agricultural Marketing Act created Federal Farm Board to buy staples (cotton, grain, wool) whose prices were falling, thus "stabilizing" them.
- 1931** Federal Farm Board ceased purchase of staples.

- 1932** Index of farm prices dropped to 68, lowest since 1899.
- 1933** Forced sales of farms resulting from bankruptcies, foreclosures, and inability to pay taxes, especially serious in Iowa and the Dakotas, rose from 12 per thousand (1921-1924) to 54 per thousand.
- 1933 May 12.** President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and its Agricultural Adjustment Act (A.A.A.), legislation to improve the farmer's standard of living, paid farmers who voluntarily took land out of cultivation or reduced production of staples. By reducing supply of agricultural goods on the market, New Deal hoped for raised prices and an increase in farmers' profits.
- 1933 May 18.** Tennessee Valley Authority (T.V.A.) created: a public corporation that sold inexpensive electric power and fertilizers to inhabitants of the Tennessee Valley (Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama). The T.V.A. also built dams to control floods and improve navigation of the Tennessee River, and implemented reforestation programs. It was the New Deal's most ambitious project for regional development.
- 1934 April 21.** Cotton Control Act (Bankhead Act) enforced reduction of cotton crop through compulsory licensing of producers.
- 1934 June 28.** Tobacco Control Act prohibited excess production of tobacco and taxed violators of its compulsory quota system.
- 1934 June 28.** Frazier-Lemke Farm Bankruptcy Act refinanced farm mortgages, making available low-interest loans and strengthening the rights of debtors to their lands.
- 1934-1939** Devastating drought in Prairie and Plains states resulted in reduction of grain crop by one-third and a flight of "Okies" (people of the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma, New Mexico, Texas, western Kansas, and Colorado) to California, where they searched for jobs as farm laborers.
- 1935 April 8.** Emergency Relief Appropriation established Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.), a national work relief program.
- 1935 May 1.** Resettlement Administration created by executive order, headed by Undersecretary of Agriculture Rexford G. Tugwell. It was an effort to relocate poor farmers, tenants and sharecroppers, and unemployed city workers to suburban "garden" communities, and it loaned poor farmers and sharecroppers money to buy their own land and equipment. Among the Resettlement Administration's model communities were "Greenbelt towns" in Washington, D.C., Cincinnati, and Milwaukee.
- 1935 May 11.** Rural Electrification Administration created to provide electricity to rural areas not served by private companies.
- 1936 February 29.** Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act replaced the A.A.A., which Supreme Court had declared unconstitutional. The new act paid farmers to "conserve" the soil; i.e., to reduce crop acreage. A provision of the act stipulated that tenants and sharecroppers were to receive a portion of the government's benefit payments to landowners.
- 1937 July 22.** Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act created by Farm Security Administration, which attempted to increase farm ownership in United States by making loans to tenants and sharecroppers to buy their own land. It also safeguarded rights of migrant workers.
- 1938 February 16.** Second Agricultural Adjustment Act provided benefit payments to farmers through the Commodity Credit Corporation and the Federal Crop Insurance Corporation, which bought up and stored surplus farm products (the F.C.I.C. insured wheat crops, in an attempt to rescue victims of the severe Dust Bowl drought).
- 1938 July 4.** In a message to the Conference on Economic Conditions in the South, which reported Southerners suffered from low living standards despite the area's abundant natural resources, President Roosevelt declared the South the "nation's No.1 economic problem."

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Side One Total time 23:30

Band 1	
<i>Dallas Rag</i> —Dallas String Band: Coley Jones, mandolin; Sam Harris, guitar; Marco Williams, contrabass/cello (recorded Dallas, Dec. 8, 1928. Columbia 14290-D)	2:46
Band 2	
<i>Southern Rag</i> —Blind Blake (recorded Chicago, Oct., 1927. PARA 12565-B)	2:47
Band 3	
<i>Dew Drop Alley</i> —Sugar Underwood (recorded Savannah, Aug. 23, 1927. Victor 21538)	3:12
Band 4	
<i>Piccolo Rag</i> —Blind Boy Fuller (recorded New York April 5, 1938. Okeh 22677)	2:42
Band 5	
<i>Atlanta Rag</i> —Cow Cow Davenport (recorded Richmond, Ind., April 1, 1929. Gennett 6869)	3:03
Band 6	
<i>Kill it Kid</i> —Blind Willie McTell (recorded New York, 1949. Atlantic 891)	2:30
Band 7	
<i>The Entertainer</i> —Bunk Johnson and his Band: Bunk Johnson, trumpet; Ed Cuffee, trombone; Garvin Bushell, clarinet; Don Kirkpatrick, piano; Danny Barker, guitar; Welirnan Braud, bass; Alphonse Steele, drums (recorded New York, Dec. 23, 1947. Columbia GL520)	2:54
Band 8	
<i>Maple Leaf Rag</i> —Rev. Gary Davis (recorded New York, March 2, 1964. Prestige 14033)	2:53

Side Two Total time 24:08

Band 1	
<i>Mexican Rag</i> —Jimmie Tarlton (recorded c. 1930. Columbia 15319)	2:59
Band 2	
<i>Hawkins Rag</i> —Gid Tanner and his Skillet Lickers (recorded San Antonio, March 29, 1934. Victor B-5435)	2:49
Band 3	
<i>Guitar Rag</i> —Roy Harvey and Jess Johnson (recorded c. 1934. Champion 16781)	3:12
Band 4	
<i>Chinese Rag</i> —The Spooney Five (recorded c. 1929. Columbia 15234-D)	3:15
Band 5	
<i>Barn Dance Rag</i> —Bill Boyd and his Cowboy Ramblers: Bill Boyd, guitar; Art Davis, violin, mandolin; Walter Kirkes, banjo; Jim Boyd, bass; unidentified second guitar and piano (recorded San Antonio, Aug. 12, 1935. Bluebird B6177-A)	2:51
Band 6	
<i>Sumter Rag/Steel Guitar Rag</i> —China Poplin (recorded Sumter, S. Carolina, March or September, 1962. Folkways FA 2306)	1:57
Band 7	
<i>Cannon Ball Rag/Bugle Call Rag</i> —Merle Travis (Capitol ST 2938- <i>Cannon Ball Rag</i> . Capitol T 650- <i>Bugle Call Rag</i>)	4:21
Band 8	
<i>Randy Lynn Rag</i> —Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs and the Foggy Mountain Boys (Columbia CL 1019. Harmony HS 11314)	2:02

We wish to express our thanks to: CBS for *Dallas Rag; Piccolo Rag; The Entertainer; Mexican Rag; Randy Lynn Rag; Chinese Rag*. RCA for *Dew Drop Alley; Hawkins Rag; Barn Dance Rag*. Atlantic Records for *Kill It Kid*. Capitol Records for *Cannon Ball Rag; Bugle Call Rag*. MCA Records for *Guitar Rag; Maple Leaf Rag* (Prestige LP 14033) and *Atlanta Rag* (Gennett 6869) furnished courtesy of Prestige Records.

Sumter Rag and *Steel Guitar Rag* furnished courtesy of Folkways Records.

Producer/Researcher: Lawrence Cohn

Sound equalization: Pete Welding

Cover art: Fred Becker. "Guitar Player."

Wood engraving. National Collection of Fine Arts (transfer from D.C. Public Library—WPA), Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Cover design: Michael Sonino

Historical chart and bibliography compiled by Arthur E. Scherr

Library of Congress Card No. 75-751052

THESE RECORDINGS WERE MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH A GRANT FROM THE ROCKEFELLER FOUNDATION

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