

FROM BARRELHOUSE TO BROADWAY: THE MUSICAL ODYSSEY OF JOE JORDAN

By RICK BENJAMIN

Joe Jordan (1882–1971) is the musician who most directly links authentic African-American ragtime with the Golden Age of the American musical theater. An artist of great versatility—he was a gifted pianist, composer, songwriter, arranger, conductor, organizer, promoter, and educator—Jordan was also remarkable for his extraordinary successes in an era of appalling racial discrimination. Threads of his long and fascinating career intertwined and intersected with historical figures as diverse as Fanny Brice, Scott Joplin, Orson Welles, James P. Johnson, Florenz Ziegfeld, Thomas “Fats” Waller, W.C. Handy, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Williams & Walker, Ethel Merman, Cole & Johnson, Ginger Rogers, Ernest Hogan, Will Marion Cook, Tom Turpin, and a host of others. Although he had little formal musical training, Joe Jordan composed, orchestrated, and conducted dozens of important musical productions in Chicago and New York, and wrote more than six hundred songs, several of them nationwide hits. He was also a businessman of such keen ability that by the late 1910s he had become one of the wealthiest blacks in the nation. Yet, with the passage of time, awareness of Joe Jordan’s music and career has faded. But a study of his rich creative legacy reveals much of importance to current and future generations. It is time for Joe Jordan’s amazing story—and music—to be heard once again.

Joseph Zachariah Taylor Jordan entered the world on February 11, 1882. The son of Zachariah and Josephine Jordan, he was born in Cincinnati, Ohio. For a creative and inquisitive child, the “Queen City of the West” was indeed a fortunate place to be. Despite its history of racial tensions, Cincinnati was celebrated for its rich musical culture; the town’s large German immigrant population had cultivated many bands, orchestras, and choral societies. Music—from Stephen Foster to Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Wagner—was very much in the air. Cincinnati also supported many teachers of classical music as well as several publishers of sheet music. All of these influences undoubtedly left their mark upon young Joe Jordan. He attended public grammar school and at an early age began to manifest great musical talent. Taking up the violin, he progressed alone to the point where his mother was encouraged enough to engage a local German musician to provide violin lessons for Joe and piano lessons for his sister. The relationship with this new tutor continued until Joe’s sixth lesson. Then came the fateful moment: When asked to review an etude from his first lesson, Joe was unable to play. His teacher was momentarily puzzled, since the boy had demonstrated the study in an earlier lesson. But then he realized that the boy could not start because he was simply *unable to read the first note on the page*. The teacher had been dutifully instructing his student in the skill of music reading, and assumed that the child was picking it up. In fact, Joe’s ear and memory were so keen that he could closely mimic his teacher’s demonstration of each lesson. Thus, Joe would “fake” his way through each subsequent lesson. But while imitation and “playing by ear” are valuable musical skills, the enraged German felt he had been deceived. He dragged the boy to Josephine Jordan exclaiming, “He will never be anything but a cheat! He will never learn anything!” Luckily, the German continued Joe’s sister’s piano lessons, and soon the boy’s attention turned to that instrument. He listened to his sister practicing and taught *himself* how to play the piano by imitating her.

In the 1880s and ’90s an exciting new music was developing in America. This hybrid product of African rhythm and Western European tonality and form eventually became known as “rag-time.” It was an underground urban folk music, developed in the black neighborhoods in the cities and towns of the Midwest. Cincinnati, as a booming steamboat port on the Ohio River, was one of these places. Cincinnati’s black tenderloin district, known as “Bucktown,” attracted its own fraternity of young pianists, raffish “Professors” who gave Jordan his first exhilarating taste of the syncopation that would soon sweep the nation.

While he was still a child, the Jordan family moved from Cincinnati to St. Louis, Missouri. In the African-American district there Zachariah Jordan ran a poolroom. This neighborhood teemed with saloons, gambling joints, and brothels. All were ragtime incubators. Indeed, by the mid-1890s, St. Louis was fast becoming known as the “mecca” of the new music; eventually most of the great black pianists and composers would gravitate there. For Joe Jordan these years soaking up the lively, *genuine* Afro-American sounds of St. Louis formed the very core of his musical being, and set the foundation for a long lifetime of intense creativity.

Not far from the elder Jordan’s place was the Silver Dollar saloon. Its proprietor, Mr. John L. Turpin, also had a very musical son—Tom. Although only nine years older than Joe Jordan, Tom Turpin (1873–1922) was already known as one of St. Louis’s hottest piano players. Young Joe Jordan must have idolized him—picking up Tom’s tunes, riffs, and stunts. In the black community Tom Turpin was lionized not only for his flashy playing, but because he could *read and write music*. This was a rare skill in those circles: Indeed, Jordan and the vast majority of his chums were “ear” players, and few made the effort to master the skills of music notation. Tom Turpin was a true pioneer, codifying the structure for ragtime *composition*. Jordan learned much from the example that Turpin set, and Turpin’s insistence that the youngster finally learn to read and create musical scores was no doubt one of his most valuable lessons.

As the lines and staves and notes on the page came alive to him, Jordan’s thirst to know more and to *hear* more about the world of music intensified. He realized that he could not find what he wanted in saloons and bawdyhouses. Only education could bring him to the answers he was searching for. But Jordan’s options were limited, since at that time blacks were barred from many centers of learning. However, the Lincoln Institute in Jefferson City, Missouri, was open to him. This fine school had been founded in 1866 by black Union soldiers expressly for the purpose of educating former slaves. On September 8, 1896 Joe Jordan enrolled at the Institute, entering D Class of the Elementary Department. There was much music at Lincoln; the school had a band, an orchestra, and a mandolin/guitar club, and offered instruction in various musical subjects. Joe Jordan must have studied music theory, harmony, and composition while he was there. He was a member of the Institute’s band, adding the drums, cornet, trombone, and double bass to his amazing resume as a multi-instrumentalist (an 1896 photograph of the Lincoln Institute Band shows Jordan playing the snare drum). These growing abilities attracted considerable attention from within the black community. The *Indianapolis Freeman* later singled him out as “the best all-around player of different instruments of the race.” Sometime in 1898 Jordan left Lincoln; the next year he was traveling as a bandsman with the “Georgia Up-to-Date Minstrels.” It is not known why he left, but the teenager’s time at the Lincoln Institute had strong positive effects on his musicianship that paid dividends for decades to come.

Around 1900 Joe Jordan returned home to St. Louis. By then Tom Turpin had opened his own bar—the fabled Rosebud Café. The place quickly became a magnet for black ragtime pianists from across the Midwest. The musical stars in orbit there then included Louis Chauvin (1881–1908) and Scott Joplin (1868–1917); the big man himself—Turpin—would often step out from behind the bar to wow the faithful with his keyboard virtuosity. For Joe Jordan, this atmosphere could have only been a post-graduate level course in the Art of Ragtime.

For a period Jordan remained in St. Louis, supporting himself by his piano playing and singing. He also found employment on the violin and drums with an outfit known as the Taborian Band. Perhaps Jordan’s most extraordinary job was with a four-piano combo consisting of himself with Turpin, Chauvin, and Sam Patterson. During these years Jordan’s skills as a pianist grew formidable: The Rosebud Café held a high-profile, annual ragtime piano-playing contest which attracted dozens of celebrated Midwestern “ticklers.” The year Joe Jordan entered the fray, he finished second only to his friend Louis Chauvin—the player

widely conceded to be the most brilliant of his generation.

In those days the usual next step for entertainers who played the piano and sang was to try songwriting, as publication spread and enhanced one's reputation and provided another small stream of livelihood. In 1900 Joe Jordan brought his improved compositional skills into use by contributing songs to the successful Williams & Walker show *Sons of Ham* (with a score primarily by Will Marion Cook [1869–1944]). It is not known how Jordan made this connection with the famous black comedy team and Cook, their volatile, classically trained chief composer. But the association was an exceptionally important one for the young songwriter, offering him his first glimpse of the colorful, glamorous world of the musical theater.

Other jobs beckoned: In 1902 Jordan headlined, presumably as a singer, with the well-known A.G. Allen's Minstrels company. 1902 also marked the appearance of Jordan's first known publications, the self-issued "**The Century March**" and "**Double Fudge**," a jaunty rag sold by the obscure Joseph F. Hunleth Music Co. The following year Jordan gained his first experience in the production side of "the show business" by acting as music and stage director for a new show, *The Dandy Coon*. Co-written by his friends Louis Chauvin and Sam Patterson, this effort was a thinly veneered copy of a typical Williams & Walker production. It opened in St. Louis and then briefly toured the Midwest before going bankrupt in Des Moines, Iowa. While stranded there, Jordan sold his slow drag "**Nappy Lee**" (named for a wild-haired trombonist friend) to a local sheet music publisher, J.E. Agnew.

In early 1904 Joe Jordan found his way to Chicago. The Windy City was at that time just beginning to be perceived by African-Americans as a place of opportunity, offering employment for blacks and a reputation for greater racial tolerance. Chicago was also already a "ragtime town" with a thriving community of pianists and composers who had been actively pioneering the music in the many "entertainment districts" which had sprouted up in the wake of the 1893 Columbian Exposition. Because of these favorable conditions, much of the St. Louis ragtime fraternity eventually relocated there.

Not long after his arrival in Chicago, Joe Jordan began playing the piano at the Pekin saloon—a bar, cabaret, and gambling den in the Black Belt district at 2700 South State Street. This establishment was owned and managed by the energetic African-American entrepreneur and "gambling czar" Robert T. Motts (1861–1911). Jordan's introduction to Motts may have been made by his fellow former-Cincinnatian Ed Hardin, a black ragtime pianist who was then the Pekin's resident player. Initially Jordan's position at the Pekin was part-time, and he did take other jobs (appearing for example, with the Wolfscapes Vaudeville Company) during this period. He also set aside time for serious composition; the splendid "**Bouclaire Waltzes**" was one result. But by September 1904 his connection with the place was already strong enough for him to immortalize it in music with "**The Pekin Rag**." This self-assured, sauntering intermezzo was sold by the in-house Pekin Publishing Co., a joint Mott-Jordan sheet music sideline. By March of 1905, Bob Mott had expanded his Pekin operation (now known as a "beer garden") to include vaudeville shows staged on a makeshift platform. Then in July, Motts promoted Jordan as leader of the small orchestra assembled to play for these shows. This promotion must have been made in recognition of the young pianist's prior musical theater experience and in the light of the fact that Ed Hardin's inability to read or write music was a handicap in this line of work.

In late 1905 Bob Motts made the decision to rebuild his saloon-cum-variety hall into a true *theater* for the presentation of "first class" vaudeville, musicals, and concerts. His ambitious vision was to create America's first Negro-owned and managed entertainment center. This was a bold plan indeed, since at that time a relatively small, aggressive syndicate of white businessmen owned most of America's theaters and controlled the finances used to produce and tour shows. This near-monopoly resulted in many injustices, not the least of which were widespread policies of restricted access for African-American

performers and theatergoers. To break away from this state of affairs, Mott decided not only to transform his property into a fine theater, but also to organize within it a fine black production company to create the Pekin's own original, full-length shows.

In February 1906 Motts began the construction of a large brick addition to the rear section of the 1870s-era frame building that housed his saloon. This new structure contained a seven-hundred-seat, two-level auditorium with boxes and an orchestra pit, as well as a modern, well-equipped stage and fly gallery. To staff his admirable "New Pekin Theatre," Motts recruited a team of top Afro-American theater professionals, including Will Marion Cook as composer, J. Tim Brymn (1881–1946) as chorus master, and J. Edward Green as stage director. Mott then enlisted a talented all-black stock company of singers, dancers, actors, and actresses. Joe Jordan agreed to serve as resident songwriter and musical director. For the sum of \$25 per week, he wrote and arranged music for the productions, directed rehearsals, and conducted the eight-piece pit orchestra during performances. Jordan was also expected to lead a smaller combo in the Pekin's restaurant before and after the stage shows!

The frenzied pace during the New Pekin Theatre's heyday is unimaginable to modern theater professionals. Jordan's creative and physical energy had to have been formidable. His success depended not only on exceptional ability in several specialties (composing, lyric writing, orchestration, and conducting) covered in other theaters by separate individuals, but also on superb organizational skills. But Jordan's most useful gift undoubtedly was his ability to write music instantly on demand: Sam Patterson vividly remembered that Jordan could "write an orchestration right on the bars in fifteen or twenty minutes." From this vast amount of music-making, a more rhythmically and harmonically sophisticated "Chicago style" of ragtime began to evolve. As white pianist W.N.H. Harding admiringly recalled, "their playing of ragtime was a long way from the Sedalia style," a reference to the gentler Missouri style espoused by Scott Joplin. Soon Joe Jordan's music and the manner in which it was performed became a focus of attention at the Pekin. The playhouse became a gathering place for Chicago musicians—black and white—eager to hear the modernistic sounds (like the "**J.J.J. Rag**") "Professor" Jordan was conjuring from his performers.

The Pekin's first full-length musical comedy, *The Man From 'Bam*, premiered at the theater's grand opening on March 31, 1906. The score of this three-act show featured ten Jordan songs, along with some of his dance and incidental music. The rest of the score was by Will H. Vodery (1884–1951), the up-and-coming black theater musician then in Chicago. Although retaining the flavor of the Pekin beer garden's former vaudeville format, *The Man From 'Bam* was indeed a "book show" and as such, represented a creative step forward. It was a critical and popular success, eventually (including revivals in February and November 1907) running for more than one hundred performances. *The Man From 'Bam* also set the pace for "production values" at the Pekin: Costumes, sets, and lighting were all up to professional standards. And much favorable comment was raised by the Pekin's lovely forty-girl chorus line, which was often shown to advantage in elaborate dance routines and drills.

Joe Jordan's feverish three years at the New Pekin Theatre witnessed the creation of an astonishing fifteen musical comedies. These were staged in addition to sundry minstrel programs and straight vaudeville. The list of original Pekin productions in order of their appearance is as follows: *The Man From 'Bam* (score by Jordan and Will H. Vodery), opening March 31, 1906; *The Husband* (score by Jordan, with additional songs by J. Tim Brymn, Bob Cole, and James Rosemond Johnson), opening April (day unknown) 1906; *The Mayor of Dixie* (score by Jordan), opening August 27, 1906; *Queen of the Jungles* (score by Jordan), opening September 17, 1906; *One Round of Pleasure* (written September 1906, not produced); *Twenty Minutes from State Street* (score by Jordan and Will Marion Cook), opening September 30, 1906; *My Friend from Georgia* (score by Jordan and Cook), opening November 12, 1906; *A Count of No Account* (score by Jordan and Will H. Dixon), opening December 10, 1906; *In Zululand*

(score by Jordan, Cook, and Brymn), opening January 7, 1907; *Honolulu* (score by Jordan and Brymn), opening February 18, 1907; *The Grafters* (score by Jordan and Brymn), opening March 4, 1907; *Doctor Dope* (score by Jordan and Brymn), opening April 1, 1907; *The Bachelor* (score by Jordan), opening May 13, 1907; an unnamed show (score by Jordan, Brymn, and H. Lawrence Freeman), opening June 3, 1907; and *Captain Rufus* (score by Jordan, Freeman, and Brymn), opening July 1, 1907.

A glance at this list of Pekin productions leads to a few interesting observations. First, the pace of the work there was furious, with a new show opening on average at *two-week* intervals! To meet this schedule, the whole company had to spend each day writing and rehearsing the next new show, while taking to the stage again in the evening to perform the current one. This is a crushing workload. But due to the limited size of the African-American community that supported the theater, there was a need to change shows quickly. While considerable, this pool of prospective ticket buyers was still a small percentage of Chicago's population. (It should be noted that the Pekin did not bar whites; indeed, Motts solicited white attendance, but their numbers were probably not high.) Within two weeks, close to ten thousand could have attended a show. After that, sales would drop abruptly. And so new "products" had to be developed and marketed very quickly.

Will Marion Cook's short participation in the Pekin project is intriguing. He does not appear in programs until September 1906. By then the playhouse was preparing its sixth show. And he was gone a little more than four months later. Was Cook, the "top gun" composer of the black musical stage, brought in to assist the beleaguered Joe Jordan? Doubtless, Cook was filling in time between his high-profile Williams & Walker assignments in New York. Perhaps he was intrigued by Motts's ambitious undertaking and wanted to see it for himself. One thing is certain: The irascible older musician must have had a deep respect for Joe Jordan, and together they created several lovely songs like "**Sweetie Dear.**" Even more telling was their creative partnership: The conservatory-trained violin virtuoso wrote *lyrics* to saloon piano player Jordan's melodies. Only Cook's deep admiration for Jordan's talent could have sustained this relationship—which continued for many years afterwards.

An important early highlight of Joe Jordan's career was his association with Ernest Hogan. At the dawn of the twentieth century Hogan (1866?–1909) was a major star of the American stage. Self-billed as the "Unbleached American," this veteran singer/comedian/actor was one of the first black performers to break away from old time minstrelsy and appear before white audiences in vaudeville and musical comedy. It is not certain how or when Joe Jordan and Hogan met; the older man did have Chicago connections, having been based in that city in the early 1890s. According to an item in a 1916 issue of the *Indianapolis Freeman*, Joe Jordan was already employed at the Pekin when Ernest Hogan hired him as ". . . his special trap-drummer on his first starring tour." The article gives no date for this engagement, nor does it indicate whether this was Jordan's earliest contact with Hogan. But the implications are intriguing. Hogan's first full-length starring vehicle was the 1905 musical comedy *Rufus Rastus*. This did include songs by Joe Jordan (including the deliciously raggy "**Take Your Time**"). The show's score was by Hogan, with additional music by Jordan, Tom Lemonier, and H. Lawrence Freeman. But Hogan was unable to read or write music, so all of his songs had to be written down and arranged by others. Possibly Jordan acted as "musical secretary" for Hogan; certainly both men spent considerable time together, probably in the late summer of 1905. One wonders if Hogan had hired Jordan to help him with the score for *Rufus Rastus*, and then discovered Jordan's drumming skills, or whether it was the other way around. All we know for certain is that *Rufus Rastus* became a critical and popular success, partly due to Joe Jordan's fine songs, especially "Oh, Say Wouldn't It Be a Dream," which became the hit of the show. The 1916 *Freeman* article leaves us one last fragment regarding the Hogan-Jordan relationship: "Hogan was strict and once slapped Jordan in the face for retarding [slowing] in a cue in the traps [drums]. The two men fought in the dressing room and were parted by Anthony Byrd, the actor" (an "A.D. Byrd" was a cast member of *Rufus Rastus*).

Joe Jordan is frequently credited with the founding or direction of a legendary black musical ensemble known variously as the “Nashville Students,” “Tennessee Students,” or “Memphis Students.” But he did *not* start or initially lead this group. The Students were in fact, organized by Ernest Hogan in May, 1905. Searching for a novel idea for a new vaudeville act, Hogan surrounded himself with a virtuoso company of Negro instrumentalists, singers, and dancers; Will Marion Cook was engaged as composer and “Musical Supervisor.” Hogan named his twenty-member ensemble “The Nashville Students” (although they were neither from Nashville nor students). The group’s instrumentation was itself revolutionary, intermingling banjos, mandolins, guitars, and saxophones with “traditional” orchestral instruments. Debuting in the summer of 1905, the Students introduced many novel effects that delighted contemporary white audiences; years later James Weldon Johnson praised the group as “the first modern jazz band ever heard on a New York stage.”

There is no evidence that Joe Jordan was involved with the original Nashville or Tennessee Students. But he *was* in fact the organizer, composer, and conductor of the 1908 revival edition of that act. Renamed the “Memphis Students,” this new twenty-five-member incarnation was assembled to perform at an Elks Lodge ball at Madison Square Garden. The Memphis Students featured several members of the original 1905 groups (including soprano Abbie Mitchell), and the performance routines were similar. Ernest Hogan, originator of the Students concept, was apparently asked to participate, but was ill (he died of tuberculosis the next year). The Elks ball appearance was a triumph, and the group was booked into vaudeville. On June 21, 1908 the Students were given the honor of closing a star-studded African-American benefit concert for the ailing Ernest Hogan. Finally, on July 5, Jordan and his troupe opened on Broadway at Hammerstein’s Roof Garden. Their act was well received and ran for many weeks. Jordan must have been very proud of his work; he brought his mother all the way to New York especially to see a performance at Hammerstein’s. Josephine Jordan sat through it impassively, and when he later asked what she thought, she replied, “Aw son, you’re just foolin’ the white folks.” A few days later, as Jordan was putting her on a train back home to St. Louis, he gave his mother \$500 and kissed her goodbye. She put the gift away saying “I’m not goin’ to spend a penny of this money. I’m going to keep it all, for I know I’ll need it some day to get you out of trouble. You ain’t doin’ a thing but foolin’ the public.” Despite his mother’s opinion, the Students in all of its incarnations was an important and influential group. In many ways it blazed the trail for famous show bands of the 1920s, ’30s and ’40s.

It is interesting to consider the opposing “gravitational pulls” of Chicago and New York on Joe Jordan’s career. There was no question that New York was the absolute center of the American entertainment and music industries. And, thanks to the groundbreaking work by black artists like Williams & Walker, Ernest Hogan, Will Marion Cook, Bob Cole and the Johnson brothers, African-Americans had finally, successfully, carved out a place for themselves in the theater. These facts and the probability of greater economic rewards had to have been powerfully attractive to a young man as alert and ambitious as Joe Jordan. It is interesting to speculate on when he made his initial foray into New York; the black theater fraternity was small and Jordan’s skillful collaborations with many of its leaders must have opened many doors. He *may* have visited there in 1905, assisting Ernest Hogan with *Rufus Rastus*. He certainly was there in August 1907, when the two Pekin Theatre shows, *Captain Rufus* and *The Husband* played in Manhattan. After that, Jordan’s shuttling between the two cities intensifies. *The Husband* had featured several songs by the celebrated New York-based black songwriting team of Bob Cole and J. Rosemond Johnson, and Jordan continued his association with them. Late in the summer of 1907, Jordan took over as music director for the road company of Cole & Johnson’s show *The Shoo-Fly Regiment*. This tour of the United States and Canada apparently lasted for several months. Jordan’s next New York project involved another former Pekin collaborator—Will Marion Cook. In the winter of 1907 Cook was writing the score for the new Williams and Walker vehicle, *Bandana Land*, and asked Jordan to contribute songs. Jordan obliged with at least one featured number, “Somewhere.” *Bandana Land* opened in New York on

February 3, 1908, and ran successfully for more than a year until star George Walker's fatal illness caused it to close.

By 1908 it appeared as though Joe Jordan was using the Pekin Theatre as his fallback job to fill in his schedule if more compelling work was not available in New York. It would not be surprising, given the Pekin's crushing workload and modest remuneration. But spring of 1909 finds Jordan back in harness there, working on a new musical comedy named *Sambo* (opening May 10, 1909). This was to be his last Pekin show; in July, Jordan resigned and announced his plan to take over management of the band and orchestra department of a large New York music publishing firm. Apparently this position did not materialize, for on September 1909 he was still in Chicago running a new twelve-member vaudeville act, "The Children of the Pekin." This led the bill at the Pekin Theatre in late September. (Obviously Jordan and Motts were still on speaking terms.) Then the act, pared down to nine performers and renamed "The Pekin Graduates," hit the road for an extended vaudeville tour. In December the troupe reached New York, where their industrious leader managed to sell some music to Tin Pan Alley publishers. Of these, by far the most important was a piece destined to become one of his major hits: "**That Teasin' Rag.**" This number was inspired by Aida Overton Walker (1880–1914), the top African-American soubrette of that era, and was published in December 1909. As a vocal, "That Teasin' Rag" (with lyrics also by Jordan) became a favorite of many leading white stage stars. And as an instrumental, this harmonically inventive rag became a standard for pianists, bands, and orchestras. Its trio section is *irresistible*.

1910 was a momentous year for Joe Jordan. It began with a Pekin Graduates tour of the Midwest. He was back in New York by April, however. That month, the *New York Age* reported that a new black professional organization—the Clef Club—had been founded in the city by James Reese Europe and a group of leading Negro musicians including Joe Jordan. Jordan then spent much of May 1910 assisting Jim Europe rehearse the Clef Club musicians for their first formal public appearance. That important concert, held on May 27, 1910, featured Jordan conducting the one-hundred-member Clef Club Orchestra in the acknowledged hit of the evening: "That Teasin' Rag." Not stopping for breath, he spent the next month creating a new comedy sketch for Hammerstein's Victoria Theatre. That year also witnessed the birth of Jordan's last instrumental rag, the whimsically ominous "**The Darkey Todalo.**"

During this time in New York, Joe Jordan had a "meeting with destiny" in the form of a gawky nineteen-year-old girl named Fanny Brice. Although his collaboration with Brice resulted in the birth of his most successful song, Jordan apparently did not leave a detailed account of their time together. About as close as we can come is biographer Norman Katkof's 1953 version from Brice's recollections. The facts as they are known: Fanny Brice (1891–1951) was an up-and-coming young singer and comedienne who had begun her career in burlesque. (This was true "Burlesque," a nineteenth-century genre featuring *parodies* of current events and serious stage plays.) In 1909 Brice appeared in a Broadway musical and was seen by Florenz Ziegfeld (1869–1932). The flamboyant producer was impressed with the talented novice and offered her a contract to appear in the upcoming edition of his lavish annual *Follies* revue. But as rehearsals began for the *Follies of 1910*, Brice quickly realized that the great showman had not given her any real part to play in it. As the "new girl," she had been more or less overlooked in Ziegfeld's glittering galaxy of big stars. Disheartened, Brice appealed directly to Ziegfeld. Katkof relates that at that moment, the harried producer assured her of a solo song spot in the show, telling her to "Just talk to the music boys," gesturing to "Joe Jordan and Will Marion Cook, the two colored song-writers." But Katkoff offers no explanation of the duo's presence in the theater that fateful day. Since Jordan had no music in the show and Cook's one number, "The Pensacola Mooch" had been submitted months previously, it seems odd that either man would have been at the rehearsal. The actual "music boys" of the *Follies of 1910* were Gus Edwards (1878–1945), the show's German-born principal composer, along with music director Frank Darling. Why would Jordan and Cook be on hand? It is possible that they simply showed up to see if they could "place" a song or two. According to the Katkof account, Brice enticed Jordan and Cook to her

apartment by promising them that her mother would fix them a fine home-cooked meal. Katkof continues:

Fanny led the pair uptown to Rosie's food. She waited until they could eat no more. Then, leaning against the piano in the parlor, she asked if perhaps they didn't have a song she might sing in the Follies. By this time the pair *wanted* to give Fanny a song, but reluctantly admitted they had nothing for her. Jordan sat at the piano picking out a melody with one finger, and the frantic Fanny asked if that wouldn't do for her. "That's nothing," Jordan replied. "That's just my tune. They call me Lovey Joe where I live, and I call this little old thing 'Lovey Joe.'" "Sing me the words," Fanny pleaded. "Let's hear the lyrics." "Haven't got lyrics," Jordan said. "This here ain't no song, Fanny." "That's what you say, *brother*," Fanny thought. Signaling Rosie to bring fresh coffee and hot pastry, Fanny sat down next to Jordan at the piano. "Let's try together," said the young woman who could not have rhymed shy with fly. "Let's work on it," she suggested.

Continuing this account, the following morning Fanny took to the rehearsal stage, and with Ziegfeld in the auditorium and Jordan at the piano, launched into "**Lovie Joe.**" Brice gave it her all and the master showman, along with the *Follies* cast, broke into hearty applause.

Further details of the "Lovie Joe" saga are corroborated by several sources. The *Follies* preparation continued, and "Lovie Joe" was orchestrated and the number placed in the show's rehearsal schedule. At dress rehearsal, Brice took to the stage and began her new song. Seated in the auditorium were Ziegfeld, stage director Julian Mitchell, and Abe Erlanger, one of the nation's most powerful theater magnates and the source of the *Follies* production money. When Brice took the stage and reached the lyric "I jes' holler, mo'," Erlanger sprang to his feet and yelled for the music to stop. Bristling, he advanced to the stage and demanded to know the words Brice had just sung. When she repeated her line, Erlanger yelled, "Not for \$2.50 a ticket you don't holler for *mo*!" He then condescendingly reminded the girl that she was no longer in burlesque, and demanded she sing "more" instead. When the girl heatedly refused and began to argue, Erlanger announced that her number was to be cut out of the show. Ziegfeld sat silently through this exchange. Crushed, Brice fled the stage and slumped into a seat in the back of the hall. Later Ziegfeld found her and said that her number would remain in the show. On June 6, the *Follies of 1910* opened out of town in Atlantic City. In the third act, scrawny Fanny Brice, dressed in a little girl's dress and wearing blackface, edged past the mighty Abe Erlanger as he watched "his" show from the wings. After a sidelong glance at her new adversary, Fanny Brice launched breezily into the world premiere of "Lovie Joe." At first the audience was not quite sure what to make of this bizarre figure on the stage before them. The *Follies* was, after all, famous mainly for its gorgeous women. But within a few measures Fanny Brice had completely enchanted them. Triumph! The audience burst into thunderous applause and demanded several encores. The little girl and "Lovie Joe" had actually stopped the *Follies*!

But the real test for Fanny Brice and Jordan's new song was still to come: On June 20th the *Follies*, back from tryout, opened on Broadway at the Jardin de Paris. The unnerving task now at hand was impressing jaded critics and hardened first-nighters. But once again the gangly girl and "Lovie Joe" stopped the show: A star was truly born, and a hit song in the bargain. This time, as Brice took her curtain calls (up to twenty-seven, by some accounts) to the crowd's thunderous applause, Joe Jordan stood on the sidewalk outside listening. He wept with joy *and* frustration: As a black man he could create the music they were cheering, but he could not enter the theater to hear it with them.

Late in life, Joe Jordan said his decision to go abroad for the first time was motivated by his wish to escape the racism of the United States. By 1910 his work had taken him across much of America, and resentment caused by his experiences may have reached unbearable levels. Several of Jordan's associates had toured abroad, and no doubt had sung the virtues of other lands. And so, when the opportunity presented itself in December 1910, Joe Jordan made his way to Europe. He had been engaged for an extensive vaudeville tour there along with another African-American pianist, George W. Baker in a duo-

piano act called “The Emperors of Ragtime.” The pair stayed busy for several months, before Jordan moved on to membership with a black dance troupe known as “King & Bailey’s Chocolate Drops.” This larger company toured England, Germany, and Belgium. They even appeared for a time at the Brussels International Exposition as the “The American Negro Minstrels”; a reviewer there commented on Jordan’s demonstration of authentic cakewalk dancing! By October 1911 Jordan was back in England, appearing in vaudeville accompanying the African-American soprano Maude Turner.

While working in the British music halls, Jordan must have been pleased to learn of a great tribute paid him in the *Indianapolis Freeman*: The December 23 issue of that paper carried William Foster’s article, “Great Colored Song Writers and Their Songs.” In the essay, Jordan was heralded as one of America’s top three black musicians. The others cited are Will Marion Cook and J. Rosemond Johnson. Foster takes pains to point out that while both Cook and Johnson had enjoyed the advantages of conservatory training (at Oberlin and New England Conservatory, respectively), Jordan had achieved his successes “Not knowing or caring for such high education in music. . . .” Jordan is further lauded as a “master of harmony” who “started where he could, with a cheap violin.”

New Year’s Day 1912 found Joe Jordan in Berlin, playing the music halls with Maude Turner. They continued through the month, until January 28, when he departed for America to see his critically ill mother. Arriving in Chicago in early February, he tended to his mother (who had followed him there from St. Louis). Jordan also paid a call on the Pekin Theatre, which was under new management. Robert Motts had died in 1911 and ownership of the enterprise had passed to his sister, Mrs. Lucy Jackson. Since then, conditions there had changed considerably. After spending some time reestablishing some of his other Chicago contacts, in March and May 1912 Jordan traveled again to New York on song-selling trips. Jordan returned to Chicago in June, and launched what may have been his first non-musical business venture, the “Mecca Buffet,” a cabaret at 3334 State Street.

That summer the Republican Party was holding its National Convention in Chicago. The city had become a hotbed of political excitement. For Joe Jordan, this circumstance provided the perfect opportunity to combine his musical interests with his political ones. Theodore Roosevelt was then in Chicago, seeking the 1912 Republican nomination so that he could again run for President (he had held that office from 1901 to 1908). Roosevelt was a true hero to many African-Americans; he had been the first President to invite a black man to dine at the White House (Booker T. Washington, in 1902). Further, he had made many prominent Federal appointments to men of color (for example naming James Weldon Johnson as the first black U.S. Ambassador), overcoming tremendous opposition. But at the Chicago convention, after an epic struggle Theodore Roosevelt lost the nomination. Undeterred, he joined the new Progressive Party (nicknamed the “Bull Moose” Party) and returned to Chicago in August to accept their nomination for the Presidency. The city was again abuzz, and to celebrate this occasion, Roosevelt supporter Joe Jordan put pen to paper and wrote “**He’s Coming Back!**” A splendid march-song, lamentably it has not been heard since Roosevelt’s jarring defeat by Woodrow Wilson the following November.

Hopefully Jordan’s political disappointment that month was eased by the appearance of one of the biggest song hits of his career, “**Dat’s Ma Honey Sho’s Yo’ Born.**” Published in Chicago by Will Rossiter, it was introduced by the famous comedienne Nora Bayes (1880–1928) in the Broadway musical *The Sun Dodgers* (opening November 30, 1912). A comic “dialect” song, “Dat’s Ma Honey” sold several hundred thousand song sheets and remained a favorite of entertainers of both sexes well into the 1920s.

In May of 1913 Joe Jordan was back performing in vaudeville. He had developed a new comic sketch, “The Composer and the Moving Van Man” with Alvin Joyner. Opening at Chicago’s Grand Theatre on May 26, it was subsequently booked by theaters in several nearby cities. During that summer Jordan also organized a “Symphony Orchestra” for the Chicago YMCA. He must have also kept abreast with affairs

at the Pekin Theatre; in late July 1913 Jordan and Joyner performed their vaudeville sketch at a benefit there. That same month however, Lucy Jackson sold the place to the white musician and teacher George N. Holt. Whether this new owner wished to change the musical format of the place or had some disagreement with Jordan is not known. But in August the *Chicago Defender* reported that Jordan was going to “take his Pekin Orchestra to the States Theatre,” a new black cinema at the corner of State and 35th Streets. This was probably Jordan’s first encounter with the demanding art of silent film underscoring. It is hard to say how he fared with this new medium; the States itself declared the Orchestra a “big attraction,” and within a month of its arrival, also claimed that its presence there had caused ticket sales to double.

Taking its cue from the States Theatre and thousands of other nickelodeons and cinemas sprouting up across the country, by January 1914 the Pekin Theatre had been converted into a movie house. And Joe Jordan, coaxed back from the States, was in the pit leading the Pekin Orchestra as a “permanent feature” of the house. Sadly, within a month the Pekin Theatre was closed. One source asserts that its “going out of business” was a management tactic to escape from Jordan’s burdensome new contract. However, cinemas of the early 1910s had an astonishingly high failure rate, and the Pekin’s “crash” within a month is not an unusual story. By the end of the year, ownership of the theater had reverted from George Holt back to Lucy Jackson and her husband. In the Jacksons’s hands the Pekin began its final, fatal decline. The auditorium’s seats were removed and the place became a dance hall of low character. A locus of vice and crime, it was finally closed in 1924 and demolished in 1952. Today, the Pekin Theatre site is a parking lot.

With the Pekin Theatre out of business, Jordan’s full attention turned once again to New York. He returned there in March 1914, and quickly joined James Reese Europe’s new, exclusive Tempo Club in Harlem. On April 8 he was featured at the National Negro Orchestra’s concert of African-American music at the Manhattan Casino. On this occasion Jordan conducted his swingy “**Tango Two Step**” for an enthusiastic audience of more than two thousand. That year also witnessed the publication on one of Jordan’s most beautiful songs, “**I Am Waiting for You, Honey Dear.**” Honestly advertised as “A Ballad With a Haunting Melody,” the song was introduced to the public by Regina Dolce, a popular vaudeville vocalist.

In the spring of 1915 British producer Albert de Courville (1887–1960) commissioned Joe Jordan to organize an act for the upcoming London Hippodrome revue, *Push and Go*. Agreeing to the eight-week engagement, Jordan put together a new group: “Jordan’s Syncopated Orchestra.” This ten-member ensemble was constructed along Memphis Students lines and consisted of piano, banjo, cornet, trombone, and drums; the other five members sang, danced, and presumably doubled on other instruments. Interestingly, all of the musicians Jordan hired for this trip seem to have been New York- rather than Chicago-based. It is also worth noting that in the spring of 1915, Britain was at war and German U-boats were sinking ships off her coastline with alarming regularity (the *Lusitania* was destroyed in May). One wonders about the fees that de Courville must have offered to entice performers across the Atlantic during that perilous time.

On April 25, 1915, Joe Jordan and his entourage safely arrived in England. There was little time for sightseeing; on April 30 Jordan’s Syncopated Orchestra made its debut at a press conference at London’s posh Savoy Hotel, and on May 10 *Push and Go* opened at the Hippodrome with Jordan’s orchestra as the show’s finale. Critical and public reaction to the revue itself was mixed; *The Era* dismissed it as “three hours of banging and clanging, capped with the thunder of the ‘Syncopated Orchestra.’” For reasons that are no longer known, Jordan’s group left (or was pulled out of) *Push and Go* after only a few weeks. Instead, they began a tour of the prestigious Empire theater circuit, which continued into June 1915. The act broke up sometime late that month, and on July 10 six members began their voyages back to America.

Jordan, pianist W.H. Dorsey, and drummer Hughes Pollard remained in Britain (the latter two permanently, becoming pioneers of British dance-band music). In late July, Jordan once again found his way into vaudeville, joining forces with expatriate African-American drummer Louis A. Mitchell (1885–1957) in an act dubbed “Joe Jordan & Louis Mitchell, Comedy Entertainers and Syncopators.” Together they played throughout August 1915 at various theaters in London and Manchester. Jordan’s impressions of the “turn” are not recorded, but Mitchell said years later “It’s a wonder we weren’t booed off the stage. We were the rottenest act of the lot.”

One of the most enigmatic chapters in Joe Jordan’s life is his first marriage. In the spring of 1916 he married his British girlfriend, Nellie. Of this event, the *Indianapolis Freeman* reported: “While in Europe it was said that Joe Jordan had written a song that impressed a Scotch [sic] millionaire and in the event of time married the [his] daughter, now the present Mrs. Jordan. . . .” Jordan family lore has it that Nellie’s father was strongly opposed to the match and refused his consent. When Nellie went through with the marriage, she was disowned and left home with only what she could carry away. A differing account of the marriage is found in the December 14, 1916 issue of the *Chicago Daily News*. There, the bride was referred to as an “East Indian maiden” with “a dowry of \$150,000.” Whatever the background, the newlyweds *did* arrive in New York from England in June 1916. They brought with them on the steamer their own European automobile, which they drove all the way from New York to Chicago (these 790 miles of poorly marked and almost completely unpaved roads would have been a true test of the marriage). Upon arrival the couple took up residence at 3406 South Park Avenue. The new Mrs. Jordan generated quite a bit of interest in Chicago’s black community. A visiting *Freeman* correspondent wrote that “she is fair to look upon and denotes quality and culture.” After this fleeting reference, nothing more is heard of Nellie Jordan. Today Jordan’s family believes that a child was born to the union, but the final fate of mother and child is unknown as of this writing.

Joe Jordan’s interest in non-musical business ventures must have dated back to his earliest days. He had likely dabbled in real estate or property management as a young man. This was a common enough economic survival strategy adopted by many musicians and vaudeville performers. At age 34 and newly married, it would not have been surprising to see Joe Jordan settle down and invest his savings in a modest rental property or two. But what he did astounded the African-American community: On July 6, 1916 Jordan bought a large tract of land on the corner of State and 36th Streets in Chicago. He then announced his intention of erecting a large office and apartment building on the site. This was an audacious move, for, although this busy intersection was known as the “heart of Colored Chicago,” almost all of the other businesses and structures there were owned by whites. Here now finally, was major investment by a member of the community. This was big news, and several Chicago newspapers covered the project. The plans for the J. Jordan Building were drawn up and construction began in October 1916. When it was finished the following May, the modern three-story building featured space for five ground-floor retail stores, with eight five-room units above for rental as professional offices or as apartments. The handsome building was quickly occupied, and for many years the Jordan Building was pointed to with pride by members of Chicago’s African-American community. Yet surprisingly, on May 18, 1918, Jordan sold the Jordan Building. Although no evidence has been found, it seems possible that serious marital and/or financial problems forced him to liquidate this large asset. Certainly there would be few other reasons to withdraw so suddenly from so large an undertaking.

In the summer of 1918 he was back in New York. Together with his old partner, Will Marion Cook, the pair embarked on a new venture—the “Southern Syncopated Orchestra” (also known as the “New York Syncopated Orchestra”). This was an African-American concert orchestra specializing in the performance of Cook’s own music and his settings of traditional Negro melodies. Jordan took on the role of business manager; his recent European touring experience and booking contacts made him the ideal person to secure overseas dates for the organization. Fortunately, office duties did not stifle his wellspring of

melody; late in 1918 Jordan co-wrote with Fred Fisher (1875–1942) one of his most poignant ballads—**“Happiness.”** Inspired by a revival of a smash melodrama of the same name, the song was dedicated to its star, actress Laurette Taylor (1884–1946).

For a variety of reasons, African-American shows and performers had more or less vanished from the Broadway stage by the early 1910s. With a dearth of black productions on the “Main Stem,” most black performers returned to vaudeville, minstrelsy (then in its last days), or club work. Many simply left show business altogether. But the onrushing “Jazz Age” in the early twenties rekindled public interest in black musical theater. And as a distinguished show veteran, it was natural for Joe Jordan to take his place at the head of this revival. By 1920 his expertise as a conductor for black musical comedy and revue was widely respected. His first clients in the new decade were Henry Creamer and J. Turner Layton, the leading black songwriting team of the 1910s (“After You’ve Gone” was one of their hits). Like many successful tunesmiths, Creamer and Layton dreamed of a Broadway show featuring their music. Their first attempt, *Three Showers* (1920), survived for only a few weeks. They were quickly ready to try again, however, and hired Joe Jordan as music director for *Ebony Nights* (1921). This one never reached Broadway, dying in out-of-town tryouts. Undeterred, in June 1922 Creamer and Layton began the arduous process anew with *Strut Miss Lizzie*. Joe Jordan was again conducting. This new musical enjoyed a generally positive critical reaction, but it was a commercial disaster and bankrupted Creamer and Layton. The show’s only legacy is its title song, which remains a jazz standard (the original orchestration of *Strut Miss Lizzie* is performed by the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra on New World Records’s *Black Manhattan*, 80611-2). But Jordan landed on his feet with another show, *Streets of Cairo*, which opened on November 11, 1922. He then returned to Chicago to conduct a revue called *Ginger and Spice* (opening December 30, 1922). Reflecting the kind of jazz-inflected theater music that Jordan was now conducting, he wrote **“Brother-N-Law Dan”** (a sequel to “Lovie Joe”) during this period. While it was not adopted by Fanny Brice, it was nonetheless a solid hit. PRO’s performance here with Bernadette Boerckel is based on Marion Harris’s classic 1922 Columbia recording.

Wedding bells rang again—and again—for Joe Jordan around this time. After Nellie faded from the picture, in her place appeared a second wife, the even more mysterious Jeanette. But soon she was also gone. However, in 1921 Jordan married Irene Hudlin of Chicago. This was a successful union, lasting forty years and blessed with two children, Lowell (born May 25, 1922) and Marie (July 25, 1923). One of Joe Jordan’s most expressive piano solos, **“The Whippoorwill Dance,”** was no doubt a reflection of this newfound domestic tranquillity. Amazingly, this gentle, reflective piece was never published. It is performed here from a manuscript copy given by the composer in 1967 to his friend John Maddox, Jr. It is included on this recording by kind permission of the Jordan family.

Joe Jordan was ever alert and adaptable to the latest popular trends. When in the early 1920s a new style of dance band emerged, featuring saxophones, tenor banjo, and tuba, he was quick to embrace the change. Jordan was a fast enough study as an arranger to be hired by Chicago’s Melrose publishing company to create hot stock orchestrations using this instrumentation for its “Syncopation Series.” While carrying out such commissions Jordan spent much of 1923, ’24, and ’25 shuttling between New York and his home in Chicago, acting as a pianist and leader for dances and private functions with his own dance bands. The best documented of these, “Joe Jordan’s Sharps and Flats,” was originally organized in Chicago. The band’s instrumentation was three reeds (clarinet and sax doubles), two cornets, trombone, tuba, piano/leader, banjo, and drums. In August 1925 this outfit left for New York to begin rehearsals for a new revue called *Rarin’ To Go*. With a score by Jordan, this show was a touring attraction designed to ply the Columbia Theatre circuit. *Rarin’ To Go* toured from August 1925 until at least April 1927; when it closed Joe Jordan immediately plunged into rehearsals as co-composer (with Clarence Williams) and music director for another “Negro revue,” *Bottomland*, which opened at the Princess Theatre on June 27, 1927.

Despite his high profile and extreme productivity, Joe Jordan made very few recordings. His first known session occurred on May 8, 1926. On that morning Jordan and his Sharps and Flats band ventured into the Columbia recording studios in New York. From their performances the label eventually released two sides, Clarence Todd's "Senegalese Stomp" (Columbia 14144-D) and on the reverse, Jordan's own "Morocco Blues." In July he returned to the studio with his band to again record "Morocco Blues" and "Old Folks Shuffle" (by Clarence Williams and Fats Waller); these two masters were released on the Banner, Domino, Oriole, and Regal labels. Both of these sessions were no doubt initiated by the noted African-American pianist/composer/publisher Clarence Williams (1898–1965). Jordan and Williams shared the same entrepreneurial spirit and tireless work ethic, so it was not surprising to see them join forces. In late July 1926, Joe Jordan took the position of staff arranger at Williams's publishing company. During the next two years, Clarence Williams Music issued about fifteen Jordan orchestrations, including some key repertoire items like James P. Johnson's "Carolina Shout." The firm also issued a number of Jordan's original songs and instrumentals. One of these, "**Morocco Blues**," is a fascinating mixture of tangos, "impressionistic" harmony, and Harlem stride. It is not a "blues" at all (Jordan wrote no true blues, explaining, "I was always a *happy* person"). Clarence Williams wrote a lyric for the tune, and published it in 1926. Here, "Morocco Blues" is presented in Joe Jordan's original piano solo version complete with its unending, left-hand-splitting tenths!

In February 1928 Joe Jordan signed on as music director of *Keep Shufflin'*, a black revue featuring a score by James P. Johnson, Thomas "Fats" Waller, and Clarence Todd. *Keep Shufflin'* was a success; it ran in New York for thirteen weeks and then toured until November, closing only because of the murder of its producer, the gangster Arnold Rothstein.

During the months that *Keep Shufflin'* was on the stage, Jordan spent his daytime hours through much of 1928 composing a new score to an unusual libretto by Salem Tutt Whitney and J. Homer Tutt. This show, *Deep Harlem*, traced the odyssey of blacks from Africa to modern-day New York. Its book featured scenes from black history ranging from ancient Abyssinia to the deserts and jungles of Africa to the slave ship, a slave market, and on to modern-day Savannah and Harlem. *Deep Harlem* opened on January 7, 1929. Unfortunately, this grandiose "pageant of African-American history" was ridiculed by the New York critics and closed after only eight performances.

In 1930 Jordan and Millard Thomas began composing the score for *Brown Buddies*, an all-Negro revue with a book by Carl Rickman. Starring Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, the show traced the World War I adventures of a group of black soldiers from East St. Louis. Produced at the Liberty Theatre, the successful show opened on October 7, 1930, and ran for a healthy one hundred and eleven performances. After this, Jordan took on the music director spot for September 1931's *Fast and Furious*. This was another revue with music and lyrics by J. Rosemond Johnson, Porter Grainger, and Jordan. Aptly named, it was panned by the critics and closed after only seven performances.

Joe Jordan's interest in labor issues dated back to his days with the Clef Club. When New York's Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians finally opened membership to African-Americans, he readily joined. By the 1930s the Local was America's largest, and included hundreds of black performers, but none held leadership positions. There were rumblings of discontent among the African-American members about this disparity, and also regarding decisions rendered by a union judicial body known as the "Trial Board." This committee dealt with members who had been accused of violating the Local's many work rules. Because blacks largely worked alone or in small groups in casual settings—clubs and bars—they were more often charged with ignoring union regulations than their white "brothers" playing in the Philharmonic, Broadway pits, and radio and recording studios. A black musician who understood the conditions faced by his peers was needed on the Trial Board, but none could win election. Finally in November 1932, Joe Jordan stepped forward as a candidate. He campaigned heavily, holding a special

pre-election rally in Harlem. Mrs. Irene Jordan, who had been working tirelessly on her husband's behalf, delivered a rousing speech telling the crowd that "Joe had never failed at any undertaking he ever tried." Soon she was proven right: In December 1932 Joe Jordan became the first black man ever elected to Local 802's leadership.

The fact that Joe Jordan stayed busy during the 1930s Depression is a further reflection of his stature. In 1933 and '34 he co-composed the scores for Lew Leslie's annual *Blackbirds* revues (both starred Bill "Bojangles" Robinson). As a freelancer he also did arrangements and orchestrations for Flo Ziegfeld's last productions, as well as for veteran entertainer Blossom Seeley and newcomers Ethel Merman and Ginger Rogers. The Schuberts—those colorful and combative Broadway producers—also kept him busy updating the scores for their revivals of various older operettas. And around this time Jordan was hired to create a soundtrack for the United States re-release of the 1927 French silent film *The Siren of the Tropics*, starring Josephine Baker. When not otherwise occupied, Jordan could be found reliving his younger days "tickling the ivories" at the Poosepahtuck Club, an after-hours bar at 773 St. Nicholas Avenue in Harlem.

By 1935, the Depression was causing truly hard times for theater professionals. Recognizing this crisis, the government's new Works Progress Administration (WPA) instituted the Federal Theatre Project. The concept was to take professional musicians and entertainers off the relief rolls by creating public jobs for them. From the five thousand men and women hired in New York by the FTP, Joe Jordan was selected to conduct the one-hundred-ten-piece Negro Unit Orchestra. It was Jordan and this group of musicians who provided the music for Orson Welles's historic 1936 production of *Macbeth*. Set in nineteenth-century Haiti and featuring an all-African-American cast, Welles's update of Shakespeare dazzled the city when it opened on April 14 in Harlem's Lafayette Theatre.

One of the greatest honors of Joe Jordan's life occurred near the close of that decade. The American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) was entering its twenty-fifth year, and to celebrate this anniversary, planned an elaborate "Silver Jubilee Festival" at Carnegie Hall. This week-long series of concerts, beginning on October 1, 1939, was heralded as "the greatest festival of American music ever presented." Each evening of the Festival was devoted to a different aspect of our nation's music. An ASCAP committee consisting of J. Rosemond Johnson, Harry T. Burleigh, and W.C. Handy designed the program devoted to African-American achievement. For this concert, a splendid seventy-five-piece symphony orchestra and a three-hundred-fifty-voice chorus were assembled. The repertoire was exceptional, and included William Grant Still conducting his own *Afro-American Symphony*. But the honor of opening the program was given to Joe Jordan: Striding proudly onto the Carnegie Hall stage, he lifted his baton and called forth from these forces a thunderous rendition of "Lift Every Voice and Sing." This rousing start set the joyous mood for the entire concert, which was such a sensation that it was later repeated in its entirety at San Francisco's Golden Gate International Exposition and the New York World's Fair.

Joe Jordan began the forties with two relatively serious projects. The first was composing the score for *De Gospel Train*, a musical satire about a group of black passengers in a segregated railroad coach (book by J. Homer Tutt and Henry Creamer). Sadly, the subject matter discouraged would-be producers and the show remains unstaged. Next, Jordan joined forces with W.C. Handy to write *Negro History in Song*, a folio series of short musical tributes to the heroes of the African-American experience. For this Jordan contributed several SATB choral works, including "The Temple of Music" (dedicated to the memory of Robert T. Motts) and "Remembered: Impressions of Florence Mills." (In 1944 Handy published these pieces in an anthology called *Unsung Americans Sung*.) The following year Jordan took to the road again, reviving his dance band and touring with a revue called *Here 'Tis* (book by Jesse Jarnes, music by Eddie Hunter and J.C. Johnson).

With the United States's entry into World War II, Jordan sought a way to use his talent to help America in her struggle against Fascism. At the age of sixty, he surprised friends and associates by enlisting in the U.S. Army. Because of his high standing within the music profession he was sent to officer training school (his classmate was Glenn Miller). Jordan graduated shortly thereafter as a Captain in the Army's Special Services Division. He was posted to Fort Huachuca in Arizona with a mission to oversee the morale-boosting musical needs of all of the U.S. Army's black troops. He lost no time organizing his forces: black military bands, an orchestra for dances and shows, and a vocal group, the "Deep River Boys." Of course, he composed and arranged music especially for all of his new outfits—including some stirring marches and patriotic songs. When ugly racial tensions built up on the base, Jordan defused them by organizing a show involving everyone on the post; the men became so engrossed in the production that the unrest melted away (he received a citation for this idea). But in 1944 President Franklin Roosevelt issued an Executive Order mandating retirement from the U.S. armed forces at age sixty. Jordan, then sixty-two, was discharged from Army service, but he kept on working as a civilian U.S.O. performer into 1945.

Toward the end of his Army service Joe Jordan was transferred to Fort Lewis near Tacoma, in Washington State. He was strongly attracted to the natural beauty of that area, and after his discharge decided to remain there permanently. He moved his family from New York to Tacoma, and together they began the task of reinventing their lives in the shadow of Mount Rainier. Jordan found jobs away from music: For a time he was a Pierce County sheriff's deputy. He also worked part-time as an employee of the state legislature, dabbled in real estate, and gave private piano lessons.

Joe Jordan spent the rest of his life in Tacoma, happily embroiled in Republican politics and the raising of his granddaughter, Kimi, and grandson, Anthony. The entertainment industry had left his kind of music behind. It was now history. But Jordan, unbowed, used his talents for the benefit of his community. A stream of melody continued unabated: He composed tunes boosting his adopted state (the "Washington State Song"), for the local baseball team ("Go Giants, Go!"), and alma maters for the city's public schools. When a reporter asked him on his 87th birthday if—after six hundred songs—he would ever run out, Jordan told him not to worry: "More just keep popping into my head." He frequently drove around to sing and play the piano for school children, members of the Washington State Legislature, and the Tacoma City Council. All were delighted. And when Lincoln High School needed a piano, he wrote them a song that sold well enough to cover the purchase of a new Steinway grand. In this manner Joe Jordan—a truly wise man—kept alive the music he loved so dearly. Shortly before his passing at age 89, he told an interviewer, ". . . the days all come rushing back—the memories, everything. There's no bitterness anymore. Just pleasure that I participated in the making of the real American music. It all comes from a people who sang to hide their hurt."

Founded in 1985, **The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra** is the world's only year-round, professional ensemble specializing in the authentic re-creation of "America's Original Music"—the sounds of early musical theater, silent cinema, and vintage ballroom dancing. PRO came into being as the result of Rick Benjamin's discovery of thousands of early 1900s orchestra scores of the Victor recording star Arthur Pryor. In 1988 the Orchestra made its formal debut at Alice Tully Hall—the first concert ever presented at Lincoln Center by such an ensemble. Since then PRO has appeared at hundreds of leading arts venues, including the Ravinia Festival, the Smithsonian Institution, the Chautauqua Institution, the Brucknerhaus (Austria), the New York 92nd Street Y, and the American Dance Festival. In 1999, PRO's music inspired master choreographer Paul Taylor's new dance, *Oh, You Kid!*, which was premiered at The Kennedy Center jointly by the Paul Taylor Dance Company and the Paragon and has since toured the world. In late 2003 the Orchestra premiered Rick Benjamin's reconstruction of Scott Joplin's 1911 opera *Treemonisha*

to acclaim at the Stern Grove Festival. More recently, PRO had the honor of appearing twice as special guests of the Minnesota Orchestra in Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis.

In addition to its world-wide concert hall, university, and festival appearances, PRO has acquired a considerable following both here and abroad through its radio programs on the *New York Times's* WQXR, National Public Radio, the British Broadcasting Corp., and the *Voice of America* networks. Since 1989 the Walt Disney Company has relied on the Orchestra for the recorded theme music at its *Main Street, U.S.A.* attractions, and in 1992 PRO proudly served as “Ambassador of Goodwill” for the United States at the World’s Fair in Seville, Spain. Over the years the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra has been heard on the soundtracks of many films and television programs, and its audio and video recordings have been widely praised and considered instrumental in rekindling interest in the rich history and tradition of the American theater orchestra.

Conductor **Rick Benjamin** has built a career with the discovery and performance of American music from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He is the founder and director of the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra, which uses his extraordinary 9,000-title collection of antique theater and dance orchestra music (c. 1870–1925) as the basis of its repertoire. In addition to his work with Paragon, Mr. Benjamin maintains active careers as a pianist, arranger, and tubist. As a guest conductor he has led many symphonic ensembles, including the National Orchestra of Ireland in Dublin, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, the Aalborg and Aarhus Symfoniorkestere in Denmark, the Olympia Symphony (Washington State), the National Orchestra of Iceland, and the Erie Philharmonic. Mr. Benjamin is an energetic researcher of music for silent films; he has unearthed the original orchestral accompaniments to many great motion pictures of the 1910s and ’20s, which he conducts at film festivals around the world. His articles on popular music appear in several international publications, and lecture tours have taken him to more than a hundred colleges and universities throughout North America. Mr. Benjamin’s multi-year reconstruction of the Scott Joplin opera *Treemonisha* was premiered to great acclaim in 2003 at San Francisco’s Stern Grove Festival, and was recently performed by the Cape Town Opera in South Africa. He is continuing work on his books *The American Theater Orchestra* and *Encyclopedia of Arrangers & Orchestrators: 1875-1925*.

Soprano **Bernadette Ulrich Boerckel** is a high school English, drama, and journalism teacher who performs in musicals, operas, and operettas throughout the mid-Atlantic region. Her favorite roles include Serpina in *La Serva padrona*, the Witch in *Into the Woods*, and Marian in *The Music Man*. As an oratorio soloist, she has an extensive repertoire that includes the Mozart *Requiem*, the Rutter *Magnificat*, and Saint-Saëns’s *Christmas Oratorio*.

Originally from Houston Texas, tenor **Trevor B. Smith** now resides in Kansas City. He has performed with the Houston Grand Opera, Lyric Opera of Kansas City, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Aspen Opera Center, and Piccolo Spoleto Festival. Mr. Smith traveled with the International Tour of the Houston Grand Opera’s *Porgy and Bess*, performing at Opera Bastille, La Scala, and Teatro Royale. He is a minister of music at Paseo Baptist Church and a teacher at Westport Senior Academy in Kansas City.

The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra

Rick Benjamin, director and piano*

Yuko Naito, first violin and concertmaster*

Walter Choi, second violin

William P. Muller, viola

Jane O’Hara, ’cello

Deb Spohnheimer, bass*

Leslie Cullen, flute and piccolo*
Carol McGonnell, clarinet*
Kyle Resnick, cornet*
C.J. Camerieri, cornet
Tim Albright, trombone*
Kerry Meads, drums and bells*
Diane Scott, piano

* member, *Paragon's Pekin Band*

The Paragon Singers

Iris Fairfax, soprano
Diane Scott, alto
Trevor Smith, tenor
Martin Fisher, bass

Soloists

Bernadette Boerckel, soprano
Trevor Smith, tenor

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Joe Jordan

A Golden Reunion in Ragtime (commercial LP). Stereoddities C1900, c. 1962.
A Golden Reunion in Ragtime (radio broadcast disc). Stereoddities, c. 1962.
"Brother-N-Law Dan," sung by Marion Harris. Columbia BR 2318 (78 r.p.m.), 1922.
"Morocco Blues," played by Joe Jordan and His Sharps & Flats. Columbia 14144-D (78 r.p.m.), 1926.
"Old Folks Shuffle," played by Joe Jordan and His Sharps & Flats. Banner 1821 (78 r.p.m.), 1926.
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"Senegalese Stomp," played by Joe Jordan and His Sharps & Flats. Columbia 14144-D (78 r.p.m.), 1926.

The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra

Black Manhattan: Theater and Dance Music of James Reese Europe, Will Marion Cook, and Members of the Legendary Clef Club. New World Records 80611-2.
Knockout Drops: American Popular Music from the Ragtime Era. PRO 6002.
More Candy: Theater & Dance Music from the Ragtime Era. Rialto Records 6003.
On the Boardwalk: Music from the Arthur Pryor Orchestra Collection. Newport Classic NCD 60039.
On the Level: Songs of Vaudeville and Tin Pan Alley. Gretel Bailey Records GBR-1.
'Round the Christmas Tree: Vintage Yuletide Favorites. Rialto Records 6004.
That Demon Rag! Dorian DIS-80107 (reissued as PRO 6001).
The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra (finally) Plays "The Entertainer." Rialto Records 6005.
The Whistler and His Dog: More Music from the Arthur Pryor Collection. Newport Classic NCD 60069.

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Interviews with John S. Maddox, Jr., friend of the composer, Gallatin, Tennessee, 1993–2006.

Interviews with Kimi Ginn Rabun, granddaughter of the composer, via telephone, February 9, March 12, May 22, 2006.

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Joe Jordan audio interviews courtesy Dick Baker.

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FROM BARRELHOUSE TO BROADWAY: THE MUSICAL ODYSSEY OF JOE JORDAN

THE PARAGON RAGTIME ORCHESTRA

RICK BENJAMIN, DIRECTOR

80649-2

1. *Double Fudge* (ragtime two step, 1902) 2:08
Paragon’s Pekin Band
2. *Nappy Lee* (slow drag, 1903) 2:51
3. *Lovie Joe* (from the *Follies of 1910*) (words by Will Marion Cook) 3:19
Bernadette Boerckel, comedienne, and the Paragon Singers
4. *The Darkey Todalo: A Raggedy Rag* (1910) 2:47
Rick Benjamin, piano
5. *Take Your Time* (comic song, 1905/1907) (words by Harrison Stewart) 4:18
Trevor Smith, tenor
6. *J.J.J. Rag* (1905) 2:50
7. *I Am Waiting For You, Honey Dear* (waltz song, 1914) (words by Alfred Anderson) 4:23
Bernadette Boerckel, soprano
8. *The Whippoorwill Dance* (c. 1921) 4:35
Rick Benjamin, piano
9. *Dat’s Ma Honey Sho’s Yo’ Born* (comic song, 1912) 2:48
Trevor Smith, tenor
10. *That Teasin’ Rag* (1909) 2:16
Rick Benjamin, piano
11. *Brother-N-Law Dan: A Sequel to “Lovie Joe”* (1922) 2:51

- Bernadette Boerckel, comedienne
12. *Pekin Rag - Intermezzo* (1904) 3:00
13. *He's Coming Back!: Teddy Roosevelt's "Bull Moose" Song* (1912) (words by Alfred Anderson)
3:02
- Trevor Smith, tenor
14. *Bouclaire Waltzes* (1904) 5:33
15. *The Morocco Blues* (1922/1926) 2:40
- Rick Benjamin, piano
16. *Sweetie Dear Fox Trot* (1914) 1:44
17. *Sweetie Dear: An Afro-American Serenade* (1906) (words by Will Marion Cook) 4:03
- Trevor Smith, tenor; Rick Benjamin, piano.
18. *Happiness* (song, 1918) (words by Joe Jordan, music by Fred Fisher and Joe Jordan) 4:16
- Bernadette Boerckel, soprano
19. *The Century March* (1902) 2:24
20. *Tango Two Step* (1912) 2:59
- Appendix:
21. Joe Jordan interview excerpt 1:42
22. Joe Jordan interview excerpt 1:20

Total time: 69:24

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