

# Ragtime

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A style of popular music that flourished from the mid-1890s to 1918. Its main identifying trait is its ragged —i.e., syncopated—rhythm. While today it is most commonly thought of as a piano style, during the ragtime period the term also referred to other instrumental music, to vocal music, and to dance. The best instrumental ragtime pieces manifested sophisticated musical thought and demanded considerable technical facility of performers for fullest realization. Ragtime songs, on the other hand, were generally less concerned with musical values; they were designed to reach a large and less discriminating audience.

## 1. Stylistic conventions.

Improvisation was common in ragtime, but little of this aspect of the style has been preserved. Our information on the style comes primarily from published sheet music and from non-improvised performances on recordings and piano rolls, sources that reveal a notable standardization of musical traits. The characteristic syncopated rhythm of ragtime was grafted onto an existing stock of conventions associated with the duple-meter march and two-step; occasionally, it was adapted also to the waltz. While these conventions are themselves unremarkable, an understanding of their application to ragtime provides a useful vantage point for viewing the musical character of ragtime and its relation to other genres of the time.



Ex.1a

Virtually all rags conceived as instrumental pieces follow the formal concept established by earlier duple- and quadruple-meter dances: the march, two-step, polka, and schottische. These dances comprised three or more independent 16-measure themes, each divided into periods of four four-measure phrases and arranged in patterns of repeats and reprises. Typical patterns were *AABBACCC'*, *AABBCCDD*, and *AABBCCA*, with the first two strains in the tonic key, and the additional strains, often referred to as the “trio,” most often in the subdominant. Most rags are in the major mode, but for those with first strain in a minor key, the second strain is usually in the relative major and the trio is in the subdominant of the relative major. Common additions or interpolations to the structure include a four-measure introduction, a four-measure introduction to the trio, and an interlude between trio themes (or their repeats or variants) consisting most often of four or eight measures, but extending at times to 24 measures in length. While rhythmic

stereotypes were essential to ragtime's identity, departures from those stereotypes were used to impart individuality. Most rags were written in 2/4 meter. As a general rule, the left-hand part reinforced the meter with a regular alternation of low bass notes or octaves on the beat, alternating with mid-range chords between the beats. Frequent exceptions included successive octaves, successive mid-range chords, syncopations like those in the right-hand part, or habanera- or tango-like bass syncopations. More sophisticated ragtime composers sometimes wrote bass lines of melodic interest. Left-hand tenths (instead of octaves) are rare in sheet music, but may have been more common in performance. Scott Joplin's younger colleague Louis Chauvin reportedly played left-hand tenths. The right-hand part generally provided the syncopation. Several rhythmic configurations typical of ragtime are shown in ex.1 . The rhythm in ex.1a , in which either half of a measure may be syncopated independently, is found throughout the period but predominated during the early years, especially in pieces termed "cakewalk." Ex.1b , an augmented form of the syncopated half of ex.1a , was also prominent in cakewalks, but quickly lost importance after the beginning of the 20th century. In ex.1c the syncopation occurs over the center of the measure; this figure is occasionally found in rags of the 1890s, but after 1900 it gradually became ragtime's most typical trait. The rhythm in ex.1d , termed "secondary ragtime," is notable for being unsyncopated; however, as a repeating three-note melodic pattern superimposed on a duple meter, it creates shifting accents. It was rare before 1906, but quickly gained in popularity thereafter, becoming a cliché by 1910. Dotted notes (exx.1e and f ) were not considered typical of ragtime until the 1910s, when they gradually found acceptance as ragtime became associated with the foxtrot and other dances making use of such dotted rhythms. It is likely that dotted rhythms were performed not precisely as notated, but more as "swinging eighths," with the longer note to the shorter in a 2:1 rather than a 3:1 ratio (ex.1g ).

## 2. History.

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The most important element of ragtime, the rhythmic syncopation that distinguishes it from other contemporary dance music, was recognized as a general trait of African American music. It was commented upon by various 19th-century writers in reference to performances of vocal and instrumental music by blacks and was disseminated and mimicked as a stereotype in blackface minstrelsy. By the late 1880s march-patrols for the minstrel stage with syncopated, ragtime-like rhythms were being published in New York, and blackface minstrels in various parts of the country were syncopating songs in a ragtime manner. The conception that ragtime was associated with black culture became an underlying cause of much opposition to the music.

A signal event in bringing ragtime to a large audience was the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. As the grandest exposition in American history up to that time, it was attended by more than 20 million people, including such ragtime pioneers as Ben Harney, Scott Joplin, Johnny Seamore (or Seymour, a pianist the minstrel entertainer Shep Edmonds referred to as "the father of ragtime"), and Jesse Pickett. It is likely that these and dozens of other black musicians did not actually perform within the fairgrounds and were restricted to the surrounding areas, but countless visitors were reportedly thrilled by the jubilant sounds of this "new"—and perhaps still nameless—syncopated music. Consequently, as ragtime spread throughout the United States in the following years, the Chicago World's Fair was frequently cited as its place of origin.

Several pieces have been named as the first rag, but this is only in retrospect as contemporaneous support is lacking. Pickett supposedly performed his rag “The Dream” in Chicago at the time of the fair in 1893, but we know the music only by performances of others, decades later, such as those by Eubie Blake and by James P. Johnson; Johnson ascribes the music not to Pickett, but to John “Jack the Bear” Wilson. Recordings of this piece by Blake and Johnson feature a syncopated, habanera-like bass, which may support Ben Harney’s claim in 1897 that Mexico was one source of ragtime.

“La Pas La Ma,” a song by singer Ernest Hogan, was occasionally cited as the first rag some years after its publication in 1895; reference to this song on the covers of later rags points to its significance in early ragtime. However, while its piano accompaniment has a habanera rhythm, it does not resemble what was to become known as ragtime.

By late 1894, the term “rag” (but not the full term “ragtime”) had appeared in newspapers in a musical context, both as a style of playing piano and as a genre. Two pieces named as rags in 1894 are “Forty Drops” and “The Bully.” The former was not published until 1898, in a string band arrangement; its first strain occasionally uses the ragtime rhythm illustrated in ex.1a. The latter piece, “The Bully,” was apparently of folk origins and had six different publications from December 1895 through April 1896, bearing such titles as “Looking for a Bully,” “The New Bully,” and “May Irwin’s Bully Song.” The last named, the version associated with stage star May Irwin, was performed by her in the show “Widow Jones” in 1895 and was the most famous version. None of these “Bully” publications features ragtime syncopations but, curiously, they include a 12-measure section that foreshadows the formalized blues both in structure and much of its harmonic design.

The first music published with the term “rag” were songs, beginning with Ernest Hogan’s “All coons look alike to me,” copyrighted 3 August 1896. Its cover refers to “Pa Ma Las,” and the song has an appended arrangement labeled “Choice Chorus, with Negro ‘Rag,’ Accompaniment, Arr. by Max Hoffman.” The accompaniment features the rhythm illustrated in ex.1a. Within weeks several more “coon songs” of this sort were issued bearing similar labels. W. T. Jefferson’s “My Coal Black Lady,” copyrighted 23 November 1896, has an optional rag accompaniment by Hoffman that features the rhythm illustrated in ex.1c.

Published instrumental pieces specifically titled or otherwise identified as “rags” began to appear in print in 1897, the first being “The Mississippi Rag,” a patrol in the minstrel style by the bandleader William H. Krell. Several ragtime patrols by other composers followed, but the first instrumental piece to demonstrate the ragtime style was Theodore Northrup’s *Louisiana Rag*. Significantly, the cover refers to “Pas Ma La.” The earliest evidence we have of the term “rag” being expanded to “rag time” (which became “rag-time,” and then “ragtime”) is in a review of pianist/singer Ben Harney in the *Brooklyn Eagle* newspaper of 6 September 1896: “He invents and plays what he calls rag time airs and dances, the effect of syncopations being to make the melody ragged.”

The ragtime style that dominated the late 1890s was the Cakewalk. The cakewalk dance, derived from plantation dances performed by black slaves, had become popular in the early 1890s as a theatrical presentation and as a ballroom dance. The music, as published, was usually unsyncopated, but from 1897 on it assumed the syncopations associated with ragtime. More than 100 cakewalks were published between 1897 and 1900, most with descriptive labels such as “cake walk march,” “two-step,” and “ragtime cake

walk.” Among the best known were Kerry Mills’s “At a Georgia Camp Meeting” (1897) and Abe Holzmann’s “Smoky Mokes” (1899). These works appeared in the repertory of such notable bands as that of John Philip Sousa, and were performed both in the United States and in Europe. (One example of the influence of the syncopated cakewalk in Europe was Debussy’s “Golliwogg’s Cake-walk,” 1908.)



Ex.2 Turpin: Harlem Rag (1897)

Concurrent with the cakewalk was a style of ragtime that was both more pianistic and had a richer rhythmic language, making prominent use of syncopation over the center of the measure. An outstanding early example is “Harlem Rag” (1897) by the St. Louis saloonkeeper Tom Turpin (see ex.2 ). Turpin was the first black composer to publish instrumental ragtime; his music shows a sophistication and stylistic maturity far beyond that of the contemporary cakewalks, suggesting that, for him, ragtime had long been a familiar language. His saloon, the Rosebud Bar, was a center for ragtime players in St. Louis. Composers associated with him (the most prominent being Joplin, whose “The Rosebud March” of 1905 was dedicated to Turpin) are grouped by some modern writers in a loosely defined school known as “classic” or “St. Louis” ragtime composers. Neither of these terms really refers to a school in a stylistic or chronological sense, since the “classic” composers manifested diverse styles and were active from the 1890s to the early 1920s. Nor is there agreement as to the membership of the school apart from Joplin and his immediate associates and students, James Scott, and the anomalous white composer Joseph F. Lamb. There is no doubt, however, that most of these men wrote ragtime of a superior quality.

During the first decade of the 20th century the term “classic ragtime” had a more precise meaning. It originated with the publisher John Stark—who issued works by Joplin, Joseph F. Lamb, James Scott, Artie Matthews, Paul Pratt, and J. Russel Robinson, among others—who advertised his publications as “classic rags,” comparing their quality to that of European art music. Joplin, when dealing later with other

publishers, retained the term “classic” for his works as an expression of his artistic aspirations. One composer not associated with Stark—May Aufderheide of Indianapolis—adopted the term for her own Joplin-influenced compositions. Historically then, “classic ragtime” referred to rags composed by Joplin, by Aufderheide, and those published by Stark.



Ex.3 G. Botsford: Black and White Rag (1908)

Notwithstanding the phenomenal success of Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag” (1899), “classic” compositions were less popular with the public than the simpler, more accessible rags of such figures as Ted Snyder, Percy Wenrich, Henry Lodge, Charles L. Johnson, and George Botsford. It was Johnson’s “Dill Pickles” (1906) that popularized the “secondary rag” figure; this was quickly adopted by Botsford and others, becoming a standard ragtime figuration before the decade was out (ex.3 ).

Whereas most published rags were for piano, some, conceived as band music, were sold only for that medium. Henry Fillmore, for example, composed many rags for band, usually featuring trombone “smears,” or glissandi, such as “Lassus Trombone” (1915). Arthur Pryor, featured trombonist in the John Sousa band, and then leader of his own band, also composed rags designed for band performance, though some were also published in piano arrangements. His “Coon Band Contest” (1899), usually programmed today as “The Band Contest,” has trombone smears that are approximated in the piano score. This piece, with the trombone approximations, are included in Percy Grainger’s piano fantasy *In Dahomey* (“Cakewalk Smasher”).

Major accretions to the ragtime language developed in the 1910s. The new dance styles added dotted notes, at first in syncopated formations but eventually, in the last years of the period, also without syncopation (see Ragtime dance). A second important influence was the blues. Blues notes had long been idiomatic to some ragtime composers, and the 12-bar blues progression, suggested in “The Bully Song,” appeared in instrumental ragtime strains as early as 1904 (“One O’ Them Things,” by James Chapman and Leroy Smith). But the publication of W.C. Handy’s “Memphis Blues” (subtitled “A Southern Rag”) in 1912 brought blues into the popular ragtime mainstream. Thereafter, ragtime-blues hybrids were common.

Harlem “Stride ” was a piano style that evolved out of ragtime and was developed in New York in the 1910s by such pianists as Fred Tunstall, Eubie Blake, Luckey Roberts, and James P. Johnson. It was less widespread than other styles of ragtime because of its virtuoso demands. As revealed in a few (and simplified) publications during the ragtime years, in piano rolls made in the late 1910s, and in recordings

from the early 1920s, stride expanded the stereotyped rhythmic language of ragtime and fostered tempos considerably faster than those of dance-oriented rags. The stride style led directly to later jazz piano styles.

Ragtime faded during World War I, giving way to Jazz, the new American syncopated popular music. The change was at first primarily one of terminology; musically there was no distinct break, and many ragtime musicians—Jelly Roll Morton and J. Russel Robinson among them—merely began to call themselves jazz musicians.

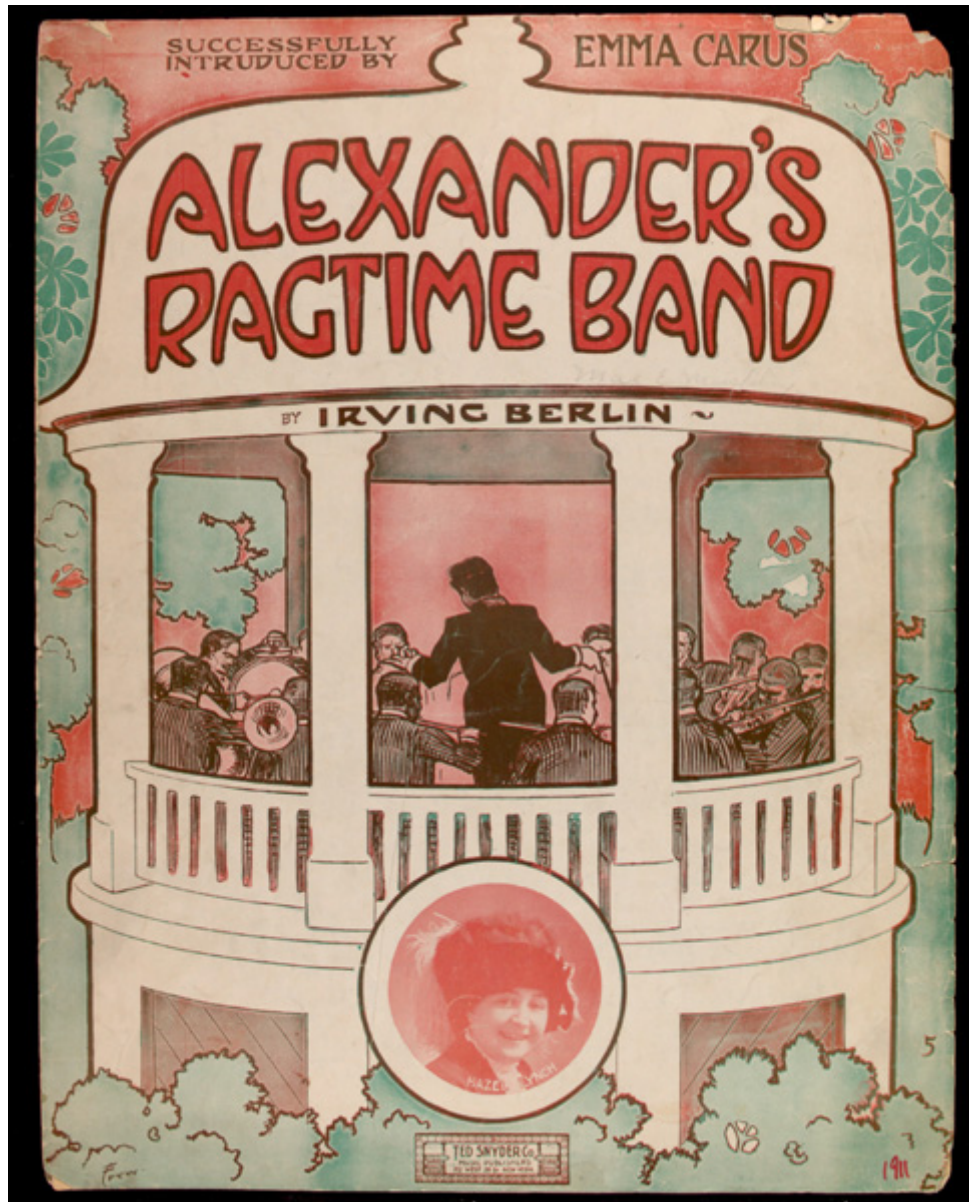
Some modern writers extend the ragtime period into the 1920s and 30s, referring to the styles of popular piano composition of those decades as “novelty ragtime.” This is a modern term dating from the early 1970s and has little historical justification. By the 1920s ragtime was outmoded both as a style and as a term, and popular piano styles were called either jazz or Novelty piano.

### 3. Ragtime song.

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Many types of popular song current during the ragtime era, including coon songs and blues, were referred to as ragtime songs. This music was more familiar to the general public than instrumental ragtime. The first of these song types, the racially denigrating Coon song, came to prominence in the 1890s. Important early examples are “The Bully Song” (see above) and Ben Harney’s “Mister Johnson turn me loose” (1896), both of which acquired wide popularity after being interpolated by May Irwin in Broadway musicals. While most ragtime coon songs were soon forgotten, a few are still familiar today, such as “Hello! Ma baby” (1899), by Joe Howard and Ida Emerson, and “Bill Bailey, won’t you please come home?” (1902), by Hughie Cannon. African American composers and lyricists also contributed to the repertory, though a few, perceiving in the genre a valuable cultural heritage, sought to retain its racial identification while ridding it of disparaging elements. Artistically, the genre reached its peak in the dialect songs of black songwriting teams such as Bob Cole and the Johnson Brothers (J. Rosamond Johnson and James Weldon Johnson) (“Under the Bamboo Tree,” 1902) and Will Marion Cook and Paul Lawrence Dunbar (“Darktown is out tonight,” 1898). Between 1905 and 1910 the ragtime song gradually lost its exclusively racial character, and any American popular song of a strongly rhythmic nature was apt to bear the description “ragtime.” Thus typical representatives of ragtime songs were Irving Berlin’s “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” (1911), “Ragtime Cowboy Joe” (L F. Muir and M. Abrahams, 1912), and “Waiting for the Robert E. Lee” (Muir, 1912). “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” though virtually unsyncopated, was viewed by many of the public as the greatest of ragtime hits, and probably influenced the acceptance of non-syncopated ragtime. As blues became more widely known, following the success of Handy’s “Memphis Blues” (1912), this genre was also included in the ragtime category. The use of the term “ragtime” became increasingly pervasive and indiscriminate until, around the time of World War I, it was replaced by a new catchword, “jazz.”





Sheet music for Irving Berlin's "Alexander's Ragtime Band," illustrated by John Frew, 1911.

The New York Public Library / Art Resource, NY

Distinctions between ragtime songs and instrumental ragtime pieces are usually considerable, for the songs adhere less consistently to the principles of ragtime syncopation and are generally cast in a two-part verse-chorus pattern. But overlaps between the categories are also significant. Developments in one were quickly adapted for the other; songs were routinely performed in instrumental versions; song choruses were frequently appended as final strains to early instrumental rags; and many works were published both as instrumental pieces and as songs (true even of the most famous of instrumental rags, Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" of 1899, which was published in a song version in 1903). However, despite their many points of convergence, the historical paths of instrumental and vocal ragtime remained distinct; the instrumental rag led inexorably to instrumental jazz, while the ragtime song merged with other American popular song forms.

## 4. The ragtime revival.

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Ragtime has passed through several stages of revived interest. The first was in the 1940s, during the revival of traditional or “dixieland” jazz, whose foremost exponent, Lu Watters, included many forgotten piano rags in his band’s repertoire. Wally Rose, the band’s pianist, became known for his virtuoso renditions of ragtime. By the end of the decade Pee Wee Hunt’s recording (1948) of Euday Bowman’s *12th Street Rag* was a bestseller. Complementing the efforts of performers was Blesh and Janis’s book *They All Played Ragtime* (1950), the first historical study of the genre, which elevated “classic ragtime” to a place of honor among a newly developed audience. Throughout most of the 1950s ragtime was presented as a novelty—a brittle “honky-tonk” piano music, sometimes performed on mistuned pianos—by such performers as Joe “Fingers” Carr (Lou Busch) and Johnny Maddox. A broader view was offered by Max Morath in a succession of television and theater productions (beginning in 1959) that presented ragtime piano and songs in a social context, as an expression of society in the early 1900s. Eubie Blake (1887–1983) came to prominence in the 1960s–70s as a leading ragtime pianist and storyteller until his death in 1983.

In the 1960s ragtime acquired a small but active coterie of aficionados who formed organizations and assiduously collected, researched, and performed the music. But it was the work of several classical and academic musicians and scholars, focusing primarily on the works of Joplin, that spurred the ragtime explosion of the 1970s. A classically oriented recording of piano music by Joshua Rifkin (1970), a recording of works for a 12-piece ensemble conducted by Gunther Schuller (1973), and a two-volume collection of Joplin’s music published by the New York Public Library (1971) brought ragtime to the attention of performers and scholars in the classical music world. From these sources Joplin’s music reached Hollywood, where it was used as the background score in the highly popular film *The Sting* (1974); a result of this film was that Joplin’s 1902 rag “The Entertainer” became one of the most frequently played and recorded pieces of the 1970s. Numerous music folios were published, reprinting ragtime sheet music and making the music easily available to amateur and professional performers alike. A music several generations old again became popular and was anachronistically positioned alongside rock hits on the sales charts. This revitalized interest unleashed a flood of performances, opened a new field in American musical scholarship, and inspired many composers to write new rags. Some of the newly composed rags imitate the style of the original ragtime period; others, by composers William Bolcom, William Albright, and others, produce a ragtime that, while retaining key aspects of ragtime identity, do so with a more current musical language. In this way, ragtime has become a modern music.

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