

Ragtime 1

RAGTIME MUSIC emerged in the United States during the 1890s. Its roots were in plantation songs, travelling minstrel shows, cakewalks and other African-American influences. The “cakewalk” was a dance created by slaves to mock their masters, in which they dressed in fancy clothes and strutted around in imitation of the white plantation owners. Ironically, the dance and accompanying music became all the rage in white America, and its

popularity spread to Britain, where one of the most prolific composers was a Scot, Felix Burns. The cakewalk was a forerunner of ragtime, which in turn was a forerunner of jazz.

Leading ragtime composers include Jelly Roll Morton, Eubie Blake and perhaps the most famous of all, Scott Joplin (*right*).



Characteristics of Ragtime

1 Tied syncopation. Syncopation is the shifting of an expected accent from a strong beat to a weak beat; in other words, an emphasis on the off-beat. A “tie” in musical notation is a curved line which connects two notes:

It tells us to hold the note for the full value of both notes. In this example the tie forces us to emphasise the 4th note in the bar, which falls just before the third beat, now not played at all. The tied syncopation is very characteristic of ragtime.

BEATS: ● ● ● ●

d u d u u d u

2 Titles of pieces often reflect racial stereotypes; subjects are often The South, Dixie, Cotton, Plantations, etc. However, titles are not always helpful: many tunes with “rag” in the title do not have any syncopation and aren’t really ragtime (eg *Sugarfoot Rag*).

3 Ragtime often has sections in which three notes are played repeatedly which, against the 4/4 rhythm creates an additional offbeat emphasis:

4 0 5 4 0 5 4 0 5 4 0 5

Pick Direction

When it comes to pick direction and syncopation, the same rules apply: downstrokes on the beat, upstrokes of the beat. However, because there are tied notes some of the upstrokes last over what would

have been downstrokes, so you often get two upstrokes in a row. Below is a couple of lines from one of Joplin’s best known work. Note that whenever you get tied notes, you play two upstrokes in a row. Try it slowly.

The Entertainer (part) (Scott Joplin)

BEATS: ●

d u d u u d d u u d u d u d u u d d

d u d u u d d u d u d u d u u d u d