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Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival 2000

By Fred Hoeptner

The 2000 edition of the Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival held annually in Sedalia, MO, opened Thursday evening, May 31, and closed Sunday, June 4, having presented seven formal concerts, a dance, eight symposium sessions, and a "ragtime brunch." In addition, there was a full schedule of free performances at five sites scattered about town. Last Year's furor over replacement of the tent on the side of the Maple Leaf Club by the newly constructed Maple Leaf Park was somewhat moderated by the addition of a new tent site known as the John Stark Pavilion on Fifth Street in front of Starch's former offices. (Stark was Joplin's primary publisher.) The theme rag this year was "Swipes Cakewalk" by Joplin and Arthur Marshall. Attendance was good, with all concerts held in Liberty Center auditorium selling out.

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Wednesday evening began with one of the few glitches. A purveyor failed to furnish the tent top that had been ordered to cover the Maple Leaf Park stage and seating area. A last-minute substitute was a nondescript but functional tent that looked as if it had seen one too many circuses, but the scheduled "happy hour" had to be cancelled. Terry Walled organized and emceed the informal concert that night.

Thursday morning a "2000 Kick-Off Concert" featured Scott Kirby, Morten Larsen, Butch Thompson (alternately playing piano and clarinet) and emcee Terry Waldo playing the music of Jelly Roll Morton, often on dual pianos. The afternoon "Cradle of Ragtime" concert featured rags by Missouri composers. Pianists Ragtime Bob Darch, Jan Douglas, Scott Kirby, Bob Milne, and John Petley, and Trebor and Virginia Tichenor as a duo accompanied by Marty Eggers on bass, performed. The Skirtlifters, a string band led by banjoist Clark Buehling and also including a second banjo, cello, fiddle, and guitar, added variety. Petley's readings of Tom Shea's "Little Wabash Special" and Douglas's rendition of "Sleepy Hollow" were memorable. Dick Zimmerman capped the concert with, among others, Wilcockson's "Pride of the Smoky Row," explaining that Smoky Row was once a notorious stretch of Burgundy Street in New Orleans and that the subtitle "Q Rag" referred to the questions that prostitutes and clients ask each other upon being introduced.

Thursday evening's dance was held in the Mo-Ag Theater on the fairgrounds. Elite Syncopation, a classically trained quintet from Connecticut comprising violin, clarinet/flute, piano, cello, and bass, supplied the music. Their broad repertoire ranged from "Cannonball" to Jelly Roll Morton to "Echoes from the Snowball Club." Dance masters Ruth Wolfe and Andy Jewell kept activities moving.

Friday afternoon's "Legacy of Scott Joplin" concert, hosted by Ed Berlin, featured pianists Jeff Barnhart, Roy Eaton, Brian Holland, Nora Hulse, Scott Kirby, and Butch Thompson. Also performing was the trio

"Seabiscuits" comprising piano, banjo, washboard, and string bass. Mary Herndon of Sedalia whistled her way through "Swipesy" and "Maple leaf Rag" in an amazing performance that at times sounded like a duet. Hulse's reading of "Paragon Rag" was memorable, as was Kirby's "Weeping Willow." Thompson's performance of the Joplin rag "Elite Syncopations" as arranged by Eubie Blake demonstrated how far an arrangement can stray from the composer's intent.

Friday night's "Easy Winners Concert" at "Joplin Hall," a converted exhibit hall on the Fairgrounds, began with "Elite Syncopation performing five tunes. Notable was Charles L. Johnson's rarely heard "Hen Cackle Rag, A Barnyard Disturbance," a montage of fiddle tunes. Reginald Robinson followed with three original compositions, including his showpiece, "19th Galaxy." The Scott Joplin foundation presented its annual "Lifetime Achievement Award" to Dr. Ed Berlin, author of several books on ragtime and Joplin's biographer. Dick Zimmerman played some real ragtime obscurities from his and Trebor Tichenor's forthcoming folio Gems of St. Louis Ragtime. Notable were "SOS Musicians' Distress" from 1919 and "Schultzmeier Rag, a Yiddisher Novelty." The Skirtlifters, in formal attire, played five tunes including Dabney's "Georgia Grind." Bob Milne closed the concert with five tunes.

Jack Rummel, host of the Saturday afternoon "Ragtime Revelations," began the concert with the winners of the ragtime composition contest. In my opinion, this was a major improvement over previous years when the contest pieces were relegated to the end of the concert and seemed almost an afterthought. The contest judges were Mary Jo Antibus, a ragtime piano teacher from Sedalia; Nora Hulse, former Associate Professor of Keyboard Studies at Central Methodist College and regular performer at the festival, and Dr. Wesley True, Music Department Head, Central Missouri State University. The judges were sent the musical scores and a tape of all the entries with composers' names obliterated. Each judge independently arranged the compositions in preferential order and sent the list to Jeanene Wright of the Joplin Foundation. She then added the numerical scores and the piece with the lowest total was declared the winner. I won first place with "Dalliance: A Ragtime Frolic." Second place was a tie between Martin Jaeger, classical pianist from Switzerland, with his "Arabian Rag," and Hoyle Osborne, professional pianist in the saloon of a hotel in Durango, Colorado, with "Enchantment." David Dana of Bellevue, Washington, took third with "Triple Aught Rag." There was consensus among the judges that the choice among the top seven entries was difficult; however, for the first time, there was general agreement on the winners. Osborne and I were present to play our rags, and Nora Hulse played the other two. Other highlights of this concert were the impeccable performances of six student pianists ranging in age from 11 to 19 for which the Joplin Foundation should be commended. Eleven-year-old Emily Sprague played a Joplin rag with great sensitivity. David Bodine played "Slivers," composed by his great-aunt Maude Gilmore. Marit Johnson and Elise Crain (17) performed a precision duet on Blake's "Chevy Chase." Elise soloed a beautiful reading of Scott Kirby's "Ravenna." Elise was also named winner of the Foundation's annual scholarship. Neil Blaze played Galen Wilkes' beautiful "Creeks of Missouri" with some very appropriate embellishments. Following the student concert, others performing were Tony Caramia who played two of Brian Dykstra's rags, John Petley, Reginald Robinson with his composition "Lightning Strikes Twice," Trebor Tichenor, and Dick Zimmerman.

The Saturday night "Entertainer" concert, also held at Joplin Hall and emceed by Butch Thompson, featured the Tichenors with Marty Eggers, Bob Darch, Mimi Blais, Jeff Barnhart, Brian Holland, Seabiscuits, Morten Larsen, and Scott Kirby. Highlights were Blais' performance of Galen Wilkes' "Last of the Ragtime Pioneers" and Holland's performance of Janza's "Lion Tamer." Blais, a show by herself, brought out her miniature toy piano and played a rag.

The final festival concert, the "Ragtime Music Hall," was held back in Liberty Center after the "Entertainer." Appearing were the Butch Thompson Trio, banjoist Bob Barnhart, and the Skirtlifters supplemented with Dennis Pash on the mandolin banjo. Items of note were Mimi Blais' "Kitten on the Keys" with "Flight of the Bumblebee" inserted, replete with meows and buzzes; bewhiskered Bob Ault singing "What This Country Needs Is Men with Whiskers;" and the repartee between Mimi dressed as a

man with top hat and mustache and Jeff in drag. The entire cast joined for the finale "Swipesy Cakewalk."

The symposia, held Friday and Saturday in the United Methodist Church as last year, drew large audiences. Jack Rummel led off with "Xylophone Ragtime." The first xylophone recording of a rag was Chris Chapman playing "St. Louis Rag," 1906. George Hamilton Green revolutionized the field in the early teens. Dave Jasen followed with "Ragtime: Coast-to-Coast" based on his recently published book (with Gene Jones) That American Rag (Schirmer Books). He showed how most ragtime composers were ordinary people often from small towns. Clark Buehling followed with "Ragtime Era Composers for Banjo," using his string band to demonstrate. Dick Zimmerman and Trebor Tichenor presented "The Unknown Rags of John Stark." Stark published sixty-five rags by composers other than the "big three." He established Syndicate Music Co. to publish pieces which he believed didn't meet his standards of quality but which he thought would sell. Nan Bostick covered "Harry P. Guy and Detroit Ragtime." Ed Berlin presented "A Scott Joplin Update," reviewing many of the interesting details of Joplin's life discovered since publication of his biography. After the death of his second wife Freddie, Joplin joined Samuel Reed's Orchestra in St. Louis. Kevin Sanders, guitarist with the Etcetera String Band, presented "Ragtime's Influence on Early Country Music." He theorized that the "walkaround" common to minstrelsy became the cakewalk. Country musicians were exposed to ragtime in numerous ways. Pianos and sheet music were fairly common. Records, for example, by banjoist Fred Van Eps, were influential.

This year's festival seemed to run smoothly without any obvious major glitches. "Dill Pickle Park" (informally dubbed thus last year after a sculpture near the entrance) seemed more inviting and festive with the tent cover. Even the weather cooperated, with temperatures in the nineties only on Wednesday and Thursday, and no rain. The Foundation should be pleased. The 2001 festival is scheduled for Jun 6-10.