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ETYMOLOGY OF “RAGTIME”: ROLE OF “TAG, RAG, AND “BOBTAIL” (THE RABBLE) AND THE 19TH CENTURY “FANCY RAG BALLS”

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ABSTRACT

Despite abundant speculation about the etymology of “rag” in “ragtime” since the emergence of ragtime music into popular consciousness in 1896, a convincing solution has remained elusive. As *OED3* sums up the situation (*rag*, n. meaning #5): “Origin uncertain and disputed.”

But at least some new insight may now be possible. The present study is the first to use digitized newspaper archives to track “rag” and “ragtime” from their sources to full maturity, and the following picture emerges:

1. The starting point is *tag, rag, and bobtail* “the common herd, the rabble”; the word appears in *OED3* under *bob-tail*.
2. *Rag* as a social underclass was excerpted from *tag, rag, and bobtail* and first invoked in 1829 Baltimore by The Managers (as they called themselves) of the “fancy rag ball.” The “fancy rag ball”, with its implied reference to literal rags, was intended to satirize the social elite’s “fancy balls,” which allegedly had not lived up to their charitable

pretensions. The fashion for these events, also dubbed “rag parties,” “rag festivals,” “rag dances,” and simply “rags,” and involving costumery and shabby clothing, personations, music, and dancing, continued into the twentieth century.

3. By 1887 “rag” had migrated to a dance routine that previously had been labeled “jig,” and about 1890 to a style of syncopated music supplanting previous labels that also had commonly been “jig.”

4. Then in 1896, vaudevillian Ben Harney associated “rag” and “time,” probably by analogy with “march time,” and, as is well known, the press widely disseminated the pair. They soon coalesced to become “ragtime.” The boundaries of “ragtime” quickly expanded to include almost any rhythmic, popular music. The word “classic” was attached to differentiate composed instrumental ragtime.

5. By the end of the 1930s, “ragtime” had attained status as a musical genre commensurate with “jazz” and “swing.” With the ragtime revival beginning in the 1940s, “ragtime’s” primary scope contracted as “classic ragtime” instrumentals became the genre’s major expression. The word “rag” today generally connotes a piece of composed instrumental music characterized by a predominantly syncopated melody against a regular rhythmic bass, and “ragtime” connotes its genre.

* * *

“Rag” and “Ragtime”: Etymology Uncertain

In today’s lexicon, “rag” identifies a piece of music composed in a particular syncopated style, and “ragtime” serves as the generic name for that style.² “Rag” settled into the lexicon in this sense about 1890 and “ragtime” in 1896 when the musical style emerged, in the words of researchers and authors Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, as “an overnight national obsession.”³

Since the dawn of the ragtime era⁴ guesses about the sources of the words “rag” and “ragtime” have proliferated among writers and scholars, but none have yet convinced the scholarly community. This

uncertainty can be judged by the inconclusive and conjectural nature of *OED3*'s entries as reproduced in the Appendix.

The advent of digitized, searchable newspaper archives emerging early in the first decade of this century and continuing to be augmented today has greatly facilitated tracing the etymology of words. The present study is the first of which I am aware to use these tools to track "rag" and "ragtime" from origin to full maturity.

In 1897 publisher Sol Bloom issued the first ragtime piano instruction manual *Ben Harney's Rag Time Instructor*. The preface contained the following explanation:

Rag time (or Negro Dance time) takes its initiative steps from Spanish music, or rather from Mexico, where it is known under the heads and names of Habanara [sic, Habanera], Danza, Seguidilla, etc., being nothing but consecutive music, either in the treble or bass, followed by regular time in one hand. In common time the quarter note of the bass precedes the melody, and the same in 2/4 time where the eighth note is the marked tempo accented to the eighth in common time, and the sixteenth in 2/4 time.⁵

Despite the explanation's being rather cryptic and wholly specious in its reference to ragtime's purported "initiative steps," it was widely disseminated in numerous newspapers over the next several years testifying to the public interest in the issue.⁶

As early as March, 1899, the year of publishing Scott Joplin's famed *Maple Leaf Rag*, two prestigious newspapers, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* and the *Philadelphia Times*, attempted to shed more light on the mystery by asking ten musicians for their definitions. They headlined, "Rag time is not easily described. Musicians agree that it is syncopation, but none can find the origin of the term or the peculiar music."

Responses focused on its rhythmic features:

The term "rag time" is applied to music of a lively character, where the first and third note of the principal phrases are short and the second note is long, thus placing the accent in most of the bars

after the beat, making the rhythm uneven, ragged, hence the term “rag time.” The word “rag” was given by some performer on account of the jerky rhythm of the music, for most of rag time music is written with syncopated strains.⁷

Here was a rarely stated recognition that the word “rag” must have preceded “rag time.”

Of course, there were the cynics: “a vulgar abbreviation for broken time”; “The best definition of rag time music that I know is illegitimate music.”

That same year publisher Carl Hoffman whimsically likened ragtime melodies to scraps of fabric by displaying on the cover of *Original Rags*, Scott Joplin’s first published rag, the image of a disheveled rag picker and the words “Picked by Scott Joplin.” In 1950 Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, whose ground-breaking book *They All Played Ragtime* has been cited as “ragtime’s bible,” picked up on this idea suggesting that itinerant musicians freely exchanged musical ideas, “and rags, true to one meaning of the name, were patched together from bits of melody and scraps of harmony that all contributed.”⁸

In the April 1899 issue of *Musical Record* novelist, composer, respected writer on musical subjects, and ragtime enthusiast Rupert Hughes proposed the word’s origin in dance:

The Negroes call their clog dancing “ragging” and the dance a “rag,” a dance largely shuffling. There is a Spanish verb *raer*, “to scrape,” and a French naval term *ragué*, “scraped,” both doubtless from the Latin *rado*—and in some such direction the etymologists may find peace, for the dance is largely shuffling.

The dance is a sort of frenzy with frequent yelps of delight from the dancer and the spectators, and accompanied by the latter with banjo-strumming and clapping of hands and stamping of feet.⁹

In May 1899 *Music Trade Review* (MTR), citing “rag time” as “familiar to many who can give no explanation of what it really is,” interceded on the issue:

The sudden popularity of "coon songs," which took a firm hold on popular favor a few years ago and, despite all predictions to the contrary, have held it ever since, led to a variation in music known as "rag time." There is "rag time" music; there are "rag time" songs; there has been a "rag time" opera. There are "professors of rag time," "instructors of rag time" and "specialists in rag time," but precisely what it is no two musical authorities agree except on the point that it is something very popular just now.

After reciting the definition from *Ben Harney's Rag Time Instructor* given hereinbefore, MTR continued rather cryptically:

It is a question how far this lucid explanation explains and another attempt at definition is given in the word "syncopation," thus defined in the dictionary of musical terms: "An interruption of the regular measure; an inversion of the order of notes; a prolonging of a note begun on the unaccented part of a bar to the accented part of the next bar; a term used when a note of one part at the beginning of a measure or half measure ends in the middle of a note of another part, and is followed by two or more longer notes before another short note occurs, of equal length with the first note, to make the number even."¹⁰

In February 1900, *Etude* magazine postulated another theory:

"Rag-time originated in the south, where bands of colored musicians first played it. These bands are not usually organized, being volunteer affairs. . . This music got its name from the rough appearance of the bands, which are called rag-bands, and the music rag-music, or 'rag-time' music."¹¹

Speculation was still rife fifty years later. Respected jazz writer Floyd Levin espoused a theory that he had learned from famed black pianist and composer James P. Johnson:

A long-standing custom in the black community was to throw house parties for the purpose of raising funds, often for rent money. A pianist or a band was always present for entertainment... To advertise the event, it was customary to hang a white flag in front of the establishment housing the bash. The expression "Where's the rag tonight?" could be heard throughout the colored community.¹²

Regardless of the validity of the theory, here was a clue that "rag" at one time may have applied not only to styles of music and dance but also to social functions where rags were commonly performed.

Authors of books on ragtime, most appearing over the last 50 years during the resurgent ragtime revival, have speculated, incorrectly, on the origins. Pianist, scholar, and historian Terry Waldo's comment in his 1976 book *This Is Ragtime* is perhaps typical:

Although no one now living seems to know for sure the original meaning of the word *Ragtime*, it seems to have come from the phrase *ragged time*—tearing time apart. But there are several other possible derivations. For instance, the term *to rag* at one time meant "to tease," and the music does just that—it teases the listener. It's full of surprises—unexpected rhythmic shifts and harmonies. Whatever its origin, however, we know that by the mid-1890s the word was applied to a wide variety of music that had this common element of syncopation.¹³

In their 1978 book *Rags and Ragtime* Jasen and Tichenor seemed to predict insolubility: "The original meaning of the word *ragtime* itself remains undiscoverable."¹⁴

In 1980 musicologist Dr. Edward Berlin authored a comprehensive scholarly study *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History*. He reviewed in depth the original sources then available and the extant etymological theories, found them unconvincing, and concluded, "the evidence points to the simplest and most direct explanation: the ragged quality of the syncopated rhythm."¹⁵

But establishment of a word in a language is a fraught process that doesn't just happen randomly. Whether or not correct, these theories fail to address that crux issue: *what events occurred of such substantial public notoriety that "rag" and "ragtime" were launched into the lexicon and persisted there?*

The first scholarly effort to trace the etymology from primary sources came in 2002 with publishing of the monumental study of the black entertainment press by Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music, 1889-1895*.¹⁶ Among their sources were black newspapers in eastern Kansas and the mainstream *Kansas City Star*. Their earliest finding of "rag" was from 1891. Abbott and Seroff recognized that their examples applied "rag" to three separate elements of the music and dance spectrum. They linked them only with the comment:

It is quite common in the realm of American folk vernacular music and dance to find the same word used to indicate a dance occasion, a type of dance, and a musical style, or approach. These terminologies seem to link the traditional source with the latest cultural developments. In any case, dance was the medium through which the new music fashions were propelled.¹⁷

I shall designate these elements as Category I, a social function with music and dancing; Category II, a dance routine; and Category III, a piece of music exhibiting syncopated rhythmic conventions. Categories II and III include corresponding verbs.

Abbott and Seroff's observation seemed to imply an opinion that the application of "rag" to a social function had come first followed by a dance routine and finally a musical protocol.

Category I: A Social Function Featuring Music and Dancing

Soon I discovered a 16-page booklet with the intriguing title *Official Description of the Fancy Rag Ball* by "The Managers," five individuals who had conceived and administered the event, in a Baltimore library. It

was a privately printed document reporting a seemingly inconsequential charity event held at the Baltimore Athenaeum on Monday, 2 March 1829.

The authors' language is extravagantly wordy and full of sardonicism, hyperbole, and punning. In deciphering the text, I learn that "Fancy Balls," restricted to the social gentry and ostensibly intended to raise funds for the poor, have recently become fashionable having been held in Boston, New York, and Baltimore.

The Managers decry the disjunction of these balls from the sarcastically denominated "odious 'middle class'" by exorbitant admission charges and personations exclusively reflecting "the glittering geegaws of royalty and nobility," and denounce their sponsors' failure to fulfill their charitable pretensions of relief for "the necessitous poor." In response they determine to satirize the "Fancy Balls." To emphasize their plebeian motives, the Managers term their event a "Fancy Rag Ball."

The Managers obtain extensive advance press coverage in five local newspapers including the *Baltimore Republican*, which they call "the official organ of the tag rags," thus disclosing their apparent source for the word "rag." "Tagrag," now obsolete, originated in the phrase "tag, rag, and bobtail" which has been traced back to 1645 in Britain meaning "the riff-raff," "the rabble." Samuel Pepys wrote in his *Diary* for 6 March 1659: "The dining-room. . . was full of tag, rag, and bobtail, dancing, singing, and drinking. "Of course, the adjective "ragtag" is a reversed form still in common usage today.

The "Official Description" contains only sparse reference to events during the ball itself. Attendees are "sumptuously fed on goose" by a contingent of colored waiters. Typical personations at the ball include a "ragged ragman," "Paul Pry," a "horse jockey," an "electioneering rowdie" [sic], a "well-worn soldier," a "Cherokee Indian chief," a "Mexican Indian," a "demon," a "curfew toller," a "youthful shepherd," a "country woman," an "officer of the revolution," a "dancing master," a "fat lady and gentleman," a "Jew pedlar," "a "Dutch peasant girl," and a "parcel of sailors." Retrospectively, the managers hail their ball as "the

first victory of an independent middle class over an ephemeral aristocracy.”

Having discovered an early instance of “rag” applied to a social function, I decided to search the online digital newspaper archives for additional evidence. I was deluged with hundreds of thousands of extraneous matches. A more successful strategy was to search the word “rag” in combination with other pertinent words: “rag ball,” “rag dance,” “rag party,” and “rag festival.” This reduced the number of matches to something manageable: 1,242 for “rag party,” 671 for “rag ball,” 193 for “rag dance,” and 91 for “rag festival.”

Even a fair percentage of these turned out to be spurious. Some examples: One article observed that a rag ball could be found in the closet of most every household.¹⁸ Another was the carpet rag balls, parties, and festivals, a fad starting in the 1870s that soon accounted for most of the matches. Sometimes the activities included sewing together a carpet during the party from the scraps. Obviously these were not in the ragtime lineage. Other extraneous matches referenced President Martin Van Buren’s Democratic party as the “rag party” because it advocated the issuance of paper bills, commonly disparaged as “shin-plasters,” to replace what was known as specie or hard coinage.

I found pertinent newspaper references to rag balls, rag dances, rag festivals, and rag parties in various cities and among various social strata in twenty-eight of the years from 1829 through 1900 predominantly in white society but also in black.¹⁹ Many of these years produced multiple matches. It seems evident that the results of a search on rag alone, if it were practical, would substantially increase the numbers.

Category I, a social function with music and dancing, was shown to be the chronological first of “rag’s” three elements. I have selected a series of examples from newspapers which demonstrate characteristics of the “rag” phenomenon: (1) its immediate societal impact; (2) its tenure over a substantial time period, extending beyond 1900; (3) its acceptance among strata of society ranging from aristocratic to proletarian; (4) its evolution over years from “rag ball” to “rag party,” “rag festival,” “rag dance,” “rent rag,” and sometimes simply “rag.” This shift was doubtlessly facilitated by “rag’s” being more than a mere

adjective. It is an attributive noun, and in ordinary speech such nouns receive stress, thus rendering them more likely to persist in the lexicon.²⁰

1829 28 February: Ad in *The Baltimore Patriot*: “Fancy Rag Ball. . . Monday evening next” [2 March] at the Athenaeum. “Tickets to be had of any of the managers at \$1 each admitting one gentleman and lady.”²¹

1829 4 March: A commendation from the mayor on the conduct of the “rag ball” appears in the *Baltimore Gazette and Daily Advertiser*.²² It is a roaring success netting \$200 dollars and 48 cents, equaling about \$5,200 in 2018 dollars.²³

1829 13 March: The *Boston Daily Advertiser* lauds the event:

At a very early hour a vast concourse of people collected in St. Paul’s Street . . . to catch a glimpse of the tattered gentry as they were *dumped* from their vehicles. . . . Some came on drays, some in dirt carts, some in hand carts, and some on hand barrows borne by negroes. . . . We were glad to see it so well attended and conducted with spirit and judgement. . . . A group of eight or ten ragged, dirty, beggarly-looking musicians sat perched upon the orchestra, like as many scarecrows, to frighten away intruders. . . . Such an assemblage of old cast-off garments we never before beheld.²⁴

1829: It inspires a song published in broadside format, “‘Oh! Tis my Delight of a Rag Ball Night” (fig. 1; see below, p. 12).

1830: By March one newspaper reports street musicians performing the song “at every corner” and comments, “If the genius of a nation is indicated by the songs and ballads of the populace, what idea would a foreigner have of our country from hearing at every corner those sentimental and beautiful strains ‘Oh, Rose, de coal black Rose’ and ‘It’s my Delight of a Rag Ball Night’?”²⁵

1830: A newspaper ad for *Kenedy's American Songster*, third edition, lists contents including "The Rag Ball Song" and "Rag Balls Are All the Go."²⁶

1830: Ad: The 1829 rag ball inspires components of the program at the Baltimore Theater and Circus. The plot of a dramatic sketch is founded on it and "Rag Ball Night" is a featured song.²⁷

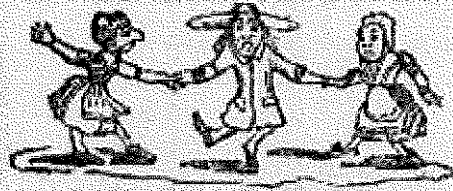
1830, 1835: Notices in a Washington D.C. newspaper solicit managers for additional rag balls implying that they have become regular events.²⁸

1837: Ad: "Mr. W. Whale's Dancing and Waltzing School . . . in behalf of the managers, being desirous of giving the public all the variety of the day . . . will for the first time in this city, early in January, introduce the Grand Rag Ball, after the manner of the celebrated one given in Philadelphia some years since."²⁹

1838: Ad: "Grand Rag Ball. By the solicitation of many gentlemen, a rag ball will take place at Washington Hall on Monday, the 23^d April, under the following board of managers [followed by a list of 20 fanciful names]. . . A first rate cotillion band will be employed. Dancing will commence precisely at half past 7 o'clock. Refreshments in the room. A strong police will be employed to preserve order."³⁰

1852: The social milieus of rag balls span the gamut from aristocratic to proletarian. Engaging the social elite, the Grand Fancy Rag Ball in Louisville is attended by the gentry, who dress as historical, literary, and working class personages.³¹

Oh! 'Tis my Delight of a Rag Ball Night, & Joe of the Bell.



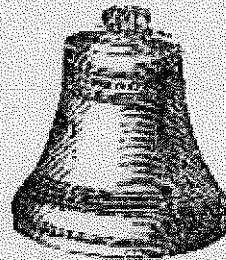
OH! ITS MY DELIGHT OF A RAG BALL NIGHT

When I was a boy of nine years old, my mother
to me did say,
Take my advice my darling son, and do not go
astray,
For if you do you'll come to rags, and as I have,
that's clear.
Oh! it's my delight of a Rag Ball Night, in the
season of the year. Now then,
Oh! it's my delight of a Rag Ball Night, in the
season of the year.

When we are dress'd up in our rags, unto the
ball we'll go;
And there we'll laugh and dance and sing, and
some they would say no;
Let others say what'er they please, I'm sure we
do not care,
Oh! it's my delight of a Rag Ball Night, in the
season of the year. Now then,
Oh! it's my delight of a Rag Ball Night, in the
season of the year.

This is the age of wonders, improvements gone
abroad,
Who would have thought a year ago of riding in
a coach?
Or going to balls in carts and drays as we shall
all do here?
Oh! it's my delight of a Rag Ball Night, in the
season of the year. Now then,
Oh! it's my delight of a Rag Ball Night, in the
season of the year.

Then here's to every rag-man, and every rag-
man's friend,
If wrong why then condemn them; if right their
acts commend;
And here's to the extinction of every wordy
care.
Oh! it's my delight of a Rag Ball Night, in the
season of the year.



JOE, Of the Bell!

Around the face of blue-eyed Sue
Did shorn ringlets curl,
Her coral lips seem'd dipped in dew,
Her teeth two rows of pearl.
Joe, of the Bell, whose wine, they said,
Was new in cask as he in trade;
His spouse—this man portel,
"You keep the bar," says Joe, "my dear,
But be obliging, Sue—Eyo hear?
And prove to all who love good cheer,
They're welcome to the Bell."

A London rider chanced to slip
Behind the bar to dine,
And found a wee Susan's yielding lip
Much mellowier than her wine.
As Joe stepped in, he stamp'd and tore,
And for the London brew he swore
He'd dust his jacket well.
"Hayday!" says Sue, "What's this I now?"
You had me be obliging Joe;
I'm only proving to the brew
He's welcome to the Bell."

FIGURE 1

"Oh! 'Tis my Delight of a Rag Ball Night" published in Boston in 1829 in
broadside format.

("Joe, Of the Bell!" is not relevant to this essay.)

For the convenience of readers, here is a retyping of the song's lyrics:

OH! ITS MY DELIGHT OF A RAG BALL NIGHT

When I was a boy of nine years old, my mother to me did say,
Take my advice, my darling son, and do not go astray,
For if you do you'll come to rags, and so I have, that's clear.
Oh! its my delight of a Rag Ball Night, in the season of the year. Now then,
Oh! its my delight of a Rag Ball Night, in the season of the year.

When we are dress'd up in our rags, unto the ball we'll go;
And there we'll laugh and dance and sing, and some they would say no,
Let others say whate're they please, I'm sure we do not care,
Oh! tis my delight of a Rag Ball Night, in the season of the year. Now then,
Oh! tis my delight of a Rag Ball Night, in the season of the year.

This is the age of wonders, improvements gone abroad,
Who would have thought a year ago of riding in a trod?³²
Or going to balls in carts and drays as we shall all do here?
Oh! its my delight of a Rag Ball Night, in the season of the year. Now then,
Oh! its my delight of a Rag Ball Night, in the season of the year.

Then here's to every rag-man, and every rag-man's friend.
If wrong why then condemn them; if right their acts commend;
And here's to the extinction of every wordly [sic] care.
Oh! its my delight of a Rag Ball Night, in the season of the year.

* * *

1864: Engaging plebeians, a rag-gatherer's ball in Toronto is dedicated to the working class but apparently also appeals to some of the gentry:

The very unusual entertainment of a rag-gatherers' ball came off in this city [Toronto, Ontario] on Monday night at which there could not have been less than three hundred ragmen and their wives and sweethearts. The entertainment was given by a Mrs. Ashal, a woman who has made a good deal of money in the rag business; and not being very particular as to whether the company should be select, she gave a general invitation to all the beggars and ragmen in the city and neighborhood...She determined to entertain her customers at a grand ball and supper...The gentry fell in with the idea and freely accepted the invitation. A quadrille band supplied music for the company in a ball room upstairs and "all went merry as a marriage bell." It is said to have been a ludicrous sight to witness the company in a quadrille, or pairing off in an Irish "breakdown" or "plantation jig."³³

1870: Ad: "Don't fail to attend the grand masquerade and rag ball of the Knickerbockers. . . Professor White's Brass and String Band engaged for the occasion. Tickets fifty cents admitting a Gentleman and Lady."³⁴

1877: "An African church in Hudson is to have a rag festival and waffle supper."³⁵

1879: "A grand rag ball of the 'Smith family' took place last night at Broadway Institute, and was very largely attended. The programme of dances was gotten up with many queer names in very queer spelling. The company who disported themselves were dressed 'some in rags, some in tags, and some in pudding bags.' The Smith family rag ball is an old institution on Fell's Point."³⁶

1881 4 February: The *Kansas City Star* reports a splendorous reception and dance given by Missouri's newly elected Governor Thomas T. Crittenden at his Jefferson City mansion headlined "Crittenden's Rag. The Governor's

Reception at Pneumonia Bluff and Who Was There”:

The governor’s reception at Jefferson City Thursday evening is pronounced by those present a most enjoyable affair. The reception at the mansion was from eight to one o’clock, and in spite of the immense crowd in attendance, was greatly enjoyed by all. . . The reception is pronounced one of the finest ever held at Missouri’s dingy capital.³⁷

Two orchestras supplied the music. One was described in another newspaper as a “good string band” and identified in a third as Friemel’s Band, which played on the main floor for set dances; and the other “an itinerant band of harmonicas and violincellos” that played on the second floor for round dances.³⁸ The reference to the “itinerant band” and its unusual instrumentation raises the probability that the musicians were black. Also implied is that the music at a “rag” need not have been syncopated, although doubtless it often was, especially as performed by black musicians.

The anonymous reporter, inserting into the text three deprecations, obviously has an agenda. He or she casually inserts the belittling word “rag” in the headline without quotation marks thus implying that the terminology is familiar to readers; similarly, the governor’s mansion in Jefferson City becomes “Pneumonia Bluff,” and Jefferson City itself “Missouri’s dingy capital.” Further, subsequently the article details the elegant formal female attire, the antithesis of that typical of a “rag.” I can only speculate on the writer’s motives.

1887: The *Salt Lake City Tribune* condemns a young lady’s dance at a rag party in surprisingly graphic detail: “the rag party was a shameful exhibition. Every dancer came in ragged clothes, the more dilapidated and airy the better. . . . A young Mormon woman. . . pirouetted on her toes until her dress stood out at right angles [when] it was discovered the dress was the only solitary stitch of clothing she had on.”³⁹

1888: "At last the editor will have a chance to attend a bang-up social party and mingle with the bouton."⁴⁰ Invitations are being issued for a 'Rag Party' . . . those who attend to be dressed in their most ragged attire."⁴¹ The fashion for "rags" continues among the socially prominent residents of an Illinois town.

1889: Ad: "A Rag Festival under the auspices of the AME Church will be held on Thursday, August 29, '89, in the church auditorium. The lady or gentleman wearing the most rags on this occasion will be presented with a prize—a gold dollar—the contest to be decided by judges. Refreshments will be served during the evening. A small admission fee of 10 cents will be charged."⁴² The fashion for "rags" continues among black society in a Pennsylvania town.

1890: The American Dialect Society includes "rag" in its compendium *Dialect Notes* with the entry "rag: dance, ball. 'We can go to rags.' (From an English exercise handed in by a Freshman in Weatherford College.) General in n.w.Tex."⁴³

1891: The black newspaper *The Topeka Call* decries local "rags": "The Jordan hall 'rags,' which are held in Tennessee town weekly, are a nuisance and should be abated."⁴⁴ This was Abbott and Seroff's earliest discovery of the word.

1893, 27 October: The black newspaper Kansas City (KS) *American Citizen* reported:

A handsome colored woman was the cause of a general shooting fracas near Evansville, Indiana, last week. A white man and a colored man were killed and five colored men were seriously wounded. It was at a "rag" where this troublesome piece of femininity was prancing about serenely happy . . .

Edward Berlin writes that this event had previously been reported in the mainstream *Evansville (IN) Journal* under the headline "Dusky Belle Drives

the Darkies Mad with Love.”⁴⁵ The *Journal* had described it simply as “a negro dance.”⁴⁶ This essential word change verifies the significant role of “rag” among black communities in the Midwest.

1893, 29 December: More evidence that not all “rags” were benignly sociable: “When an Atchison fiddler plays at a rag, he always sits near the doors so that he can get out when he hears the first fighting word.”⁴⁷

1895: Quoting from a Milwaukee newspaper, the *Kansas City Star* is one of the first to explain the “rent rag”: “Well, when some man gets down on his luck and can’t pay rent, he has a kind of benefit dance. The other tenants come to it and chip in 10 or 15 cents apiece. They have a lot of fun out of it and he raises \$3 or \$4 to pay his rent. That’s a rent rag.”⁴⁸

1895: Praising Dvořák’s Symphony “From the New World,” a music columnist disparages Victor Herbert’s music as “clap trap” and “‘rag’ music” by comparison. She is not referencing syncopated music, but what she considers inferior music appropriate only for a “rag.”⁴⁹ Here was a significant clue as to how the word “rag” may have migrated from a social event to a style of music.

1895: The writer decries the displacement of the shabby apparel and costumery typical of a “rag” by “finer clothes,” but still labels the somewhat glorified affair that he yearns to attend a “rag”:

The old time ‘rag’ dance is dying out....People dance with a little more grace nowadays and wear finer clothes, and put on more airs, but they are probably less interesting than the old timers. It is alright to gaze upon a pretty woman, dressed becomingly, dancing with some gallant knight, or it may possibly look beautiful to see them executing a waltz, but it is much more interesting and amusing to see a coarser pair of individuals doing the Mobile buck, or the wide open shuffle, or the pigeon wing, or the break down. Before we die we want to attend a country ‘rag’ dance and see the people ‘chasse,’ ‘balance all’ etc. We

want to hear the caller, we want to hear the patting of hands, and then we will die happy.⁵⁰

After 1920 the fashion for “rag” parties waned, although as late as 1926 Louis Armstrong and his Hot Five recorded “King of the Zulus—At a Chit Lin’ Rag” suggesting persistence in black society.⁵¹

In summary, evidence is persuasive that the fancy rag ball held in Baltimore 2 March 1829 launched the word “rag” into the vernacular as a type of social function with music and dancing, participants usually costumed in varying degrees, where it persisted with this meaning well into the ragtime era.

Categories II and III: A Dance Routine and a Piece of Music

What about the two other senses of “rag” related to dance and music? Precisely when and how they were first applied is still somewhat hypothetical but many clues hint at the process and we can bracket the years when it happened.

Evidence indicates that “rag’s” association with Category II came next, followed by Category III. None other than John Stark, Scott Joplin’s publisher, tells us so. In 1901 he wrote a letter to the editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*:

The word ‘rag’ was long ago applied to a dance, a regular double-shuffle, pigeon-wing hoe-down. To music or to patting. It was long afterward applied to the music used for such dance---especially when much syncopated, and now syncopations are the distinguishing characteristics of ragtime.⁵²

Category II

An 1889 article from the *Pittsburgh [PA] Dispatch* explains how the word “jig” refers to two different dance routines, the Irish jig and the Negro jig, and how their rhythmic contours differ:

The jig is a species of shuffle, and in order to dance it the floor must be sanded. There are two kinds of jigs, the Irish and the negro. The Irish jig is in six-eighths and the negro in two-quarter time. The former is danced to the hornpipe and the latter to music on the banjo.⁵³

Newspaper references indicate that "rag" was already synonymous with "(Negro) jig" in some areas of the country. They also reveal the popularity of the "rag" dance in both black and white society particularly in eastern Kansas and Nebraska and western Missouri where "ragging" seems to have flourished.

1887 Headlined "A Night Scene in a Cellar on Lower Dodge Street," an article describes "ragging" among black society in Omaha:

"Every body rag!" is the next order, and every one obeys. . . "Ragging" is a feature of the dance which probably originated with the darkies. At any rate, it is most largely indulged in by them. The male dancer, when he "rags," kicks his feet into the air, at the same time bending his body into all sorts of grotesque shapes. The female "ragger" sways her body to and fro, as she seizes her dress and jerks it higher than strict ideas of propriety would warrant. All this is done in perfect time with the music, which is of that quick and jerky sort so admired by the negroes . . . These dances are kept up until 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning . . ."⁵⁴

The "quick and jerky" nature of the musical accompaniment implies syncopation. This is the earliest example of "rag" in its terpsichorean usage found so far.

1888: An article relating to Omaha's white society paints a more decorous picture suggesting that "rag" dancing had several faces. Also it seems to use the words "jig" and "rag" interchangeably implying that "rag's" migration to the dance routine formerly called "jig" has been recent:

Something New in Dancing. . . Wing and jig dancing are getting to be great fads this season. I have six pupils, four of whom are society girls,

learning 'winging' and 'ragging.' They are dead stuck on going before the footlights. . . . Winging and ragging are very fascinating dances to ladies, and as soon as they get a little familiar with handling their feet they are enraptured with this kind of terpsichorean art a great deal more than they are with the waltz or any other round dance in which they are dragged around by a male partner.⁵⁵

1889: An item from eastern Kansas suggests that "rag" is now the preferred term replacing the ambiguous "jig": "'Ragging' is the latest term for dancing, and 'ragging' is all the rage right now. The last one was held at the residence of Mrs. H. Umdenstock . . . and still there's more to follow."⁵⁶

1889: "Ragging" attracts broad public notice in central Kansas: "The darkies 'ragging' in one of Jones' Brothers large show windows attract large crowds daily."⁵⁷

1891: Impromptu "ragging" seems to be a popular exercise: "An old gentleman . . . attracted much attention at the Gulf depot at noon while the train stopped twenty minutes for dinner, by getting out onto the platform and 'ragging' for a crowd of colored boot-blacks whom he gathered around him. He was quite an artist at the sport . . ."⁵⁸

1892: Article concerning a white fiddler in Atchison, Kansas, seems to suggest that the readership understood that "rag" had two connotations:

Ab. Norris . . . was once the most popular "rag" player in Atchison. He was in great demand, and for three weeks he played for a "rag" every night. About three months ago he quit playing, and "rags" have since been a thing of the past. Nobody has been able to succeed him, and it is probable that "ragging" will become a lost art.⁵⁹

The term "'rag' player" is ambiguous. It could mean either a performer at "rag" social events or a performer of "rag" music. The second and third usages of "rag" clarify that the reference is to "rag" social events. However, the fourth usage, as a gerund, calls "ragging" a potential "lost art." Whether the

“lost art” is a dance or musical performance is unclear, but I suspect the former.

1894: The mainstream *Kansas City Star* publishes an item later reprinted in the *Leavenworth Herald*: “A Kansas girl who attended a function in this town where they sang ‘Answered’ and ‘Brown October Ale,’ said it only needed ‘O, Promise Me’ and a little ‘ragging’ to make her feel entirely at home.”⁶⁰ Abbott and Seroff comment, “The fact that the *Leavenworth Herald* plucked this item from the December 11, 1894, edition of the mainstream daily *Kansas City Star* suggests that by the end of 1894 in eastern Kansas the notion of ‘a little ragging’ was familiar on both sides of the race line.”⁶¹ It now appears that this familiarity had occurred more than seven years earlier.

1894: An example from Utah documents that the popularity of “ragging” at social events had spread widely and was not confined to Kansas: “Mr. Laureil rendered his cabinet impersonations last night which were well received and Mr. Swain’s rag dancing was of the best.”⁶²

1896: “Ragging” has become sufficiently fashionable that a more detailed description is published in several mainstream newspapers:

The old southern cakewalk is becoming a thing of the past in some parts of the South. In its stead there is now a dance, which is known as the “rag.” The dancers form a square in the center of the dance hall, each standing separately, a man and a woman alternately. . . There is a caller. . .”Join Hands!” he yells. There is a shuffle of the feet and the gentlemen “sasha,” or dance, across the room and join hands with the ladies. Both shuffle their feet, when presently the caller yells at the top of his voice, “Everybody Rag!” Dancing continues for some time, and when all is over, the best “ragging” couple is awarded the cake . . . The “rag” is . . . very similar to the “old Virginia reel,” but there is more shuffling of the feet and it is of longer duration.⁶³

1913: A local ordinance passed in Santa Cruz, CA documents that “ragging,” apparently still fashionable, continues to exasperate the more sanctimonious

members of society well into the twentieth century. "Section 1: It shall be unlawful. . . for any person to dance or participate in the dancing, at any public gathering or assemblage. . . of any of the dances commonly known as the 'turkey trot,' 'Texas Tommy,' 'grizzly bear', 'bunny hug,' or any other dances similar in character to said dances or any dancing known as 'ragging.'"⁶⁴

In summary, it appears that by 1887 the word "rag," replacing "jig," had been firmly established in both white and black culture to designate a fashionable dance persisting well into the 1900s.

Category III

In musical contexts, substantial evidence suggests that "rag" and "jig" were, again, once considered synonymous. An article from 1899 cites "Old Folks at Home" as a song from "fifty years earlier" that "uses 'rag-time' music," and comments: "Sam S. Sanford, the old minstrel, while in London in 1848, heard sailors from English ships just arriving from this country, humming it around the wharves. At that time it was only out, and was the popular melody of the day. It was, however, given in jig, or what is practically the same thing, 'rag-time.'"⁶⁵

Although syncopated music in the mid-19th century seems to have been largely the purview of string musicians, syncopated pieces published for piano did exist; but rhythmically and harmonically they were considerably more rudimentary than those published during the ragtime era. No particular word had yet been devised to identify such compositions nor had a standard protocol been adopted for notating the syncopation. Examples include "Chestnut Street Schottisch" [sic; the word is German] from 1858 composed by W.B. Harvey; "Shin-Plaster Jig," from 1864, composed by Jo. Benson⁶⁶; and "The Great Wahoo Polka," also from 1864, composed by John W. Pattison.⁶⁷ In each case the pattern of syncopation is that designated by Edward Berlin as "untied syncopation,"⁶⁸ and it is confined to one or two strains in each piece. This pattern, demonstrated in figure 2 (see below, p. 23), would later characterize published scores for pieces termed "cakewalks."⁶⁹

* * *

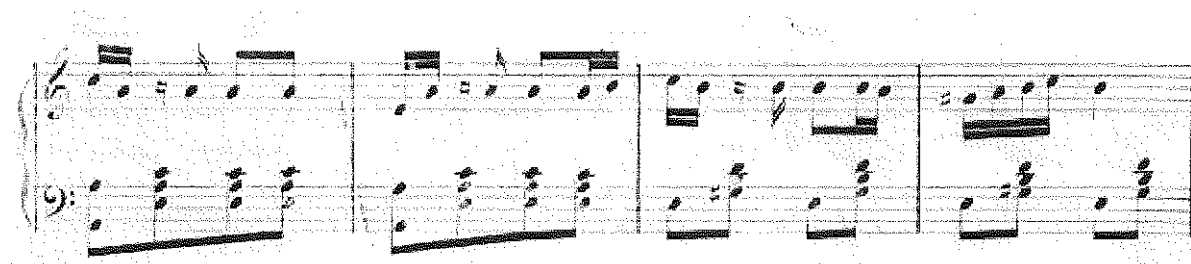


FIGURE 2

Example of “cakewalk style” syncopation as demonstrated in piano score of “Shin-Plaster Jig.”

* * *

1860: *Buckley's New Banjo Book*, a widely distributed tutor, is published. The index lists a variety of musical styles, but no rags. Further, out of the 131 musical selections, Dr. Bob Winans, professor emeritus of American literature and folklore at Gettysburg College and banjoist, identifies 22 containing syncopated rhythmic patterns, all but three labeled “jigs.”⁷⁰ Those not labelled “jigs” are merely titled without categorization of style. None are labelled “rags.” This confirms that a word used earlier for the type of syncopated piece that would later be termed a “rag” was most often “jig,” although it differs from “rag” in that it did not necessarily imply syncopation.

1868: The updated *Buckley's Banjo Guide* still lists no rags. Thus, we can infer that the word “rag” had not yet been applied to a musical composition.

1893, 14 May: The earliest instance thus far discovered of the word “rag” used to identify a musical composition is in an article from the *San Francisco Call* reporting a horse race named for a newspaper column parodying black culture. This was just two weeks after the opening of the Chicago World's Fair. Writers have cited a locale near the fair known as the levee district as the probable place where the rag performance style was first widely disseminated to the public. Somehow San Francisco had already gotten the word.

The Lime Kiln Club, colored suburban. . . in which all the riders were men of color, caused a little merriment before the start. . . . Then the band played a "rag" "There's a new coon in town." This melody tickled Luke Flowers, Wild Robin's pilot, nearly to death, and, during his efforts to suppress his mirth, and to keep his seat in the saddle, he would say, "Dat rag reminds me ob old times, boys."⁷¹

The lack of explanation implies that by 1893 the word "rag" in its musical context was familiar to readers; however, its placement in quotes implies that it was considered vernacular.

Thus evidence shows that the word "rag" was first applied to a musical style between 1868 and 1893. I suggest that this occurred about 1890, soon after "rag" had replaced "jig" in terpsichorean contexts.

1894, 8 December: The next instance occurs in the *Leavenworth Herald*: "Kansas City girls can't play anything on pianos except 'rags' and the worst kind of rags at that. 'The Bully' and 'Forty Drops' are their favorites."⁷²

1895: The *Leavenworth Herald* observes, "If the present 'rag' craze does not die out pretty soon, every young man in the city will be able to play some kind of a 'rag' and then call himself a piano player. At the present rate Leavenworth will soon be a close second to Kansas City as a manufacturer of piano pugilists."⁷³

1896: The word "rag" first appears in sheet music: "All Coons Look Alike to Me" by Ernest Hogan copyright 3 August, and "My Coal Black Lady" by W.T. Jefferson, copyright 28 November, both published by M. Witmark and Sons. The recitals "Choice chorus, with Negro 'rag' accompaniment by Max Hoffman" and "Rag accompaniment to chorus Coal Black Lady Arr. by Max Hoffman" appear on pages 6 and 4, respectively. The cited items are songs.

1897: The first instrumental piano rags are subsumed into the "ragtime" category when 24 are published.⁷⁴ According to Library of Congress copyright records, the first titular rag, "Mississippi Rag" by William H. Krell, is published in January.⁷⁵

In 1949 Blesh and Janis interviewed Tom Ireland, clarinetist and member of Sedalia's celebrated Queen City Concert Band in 1897 when ragtime was first "seeping in" to the band's repertoire of marches. Ireland confirms that "rag" replaced "jig" in musical contexts:

Tom Ireland recalls that up to that time ragtime piano was called "jig piano" and the syncopating bands, like Joplin's, were called "jig bands." This term, taken from jig dances, even came a little later to be a designation for the Negro himself.⁷⁶

In 1914 an anonymous writer, signing his name "A Lover of the Simon Pure," wrote to the editor of the *American Magazine* claiming to have been responsible for "rag's" appropriation:

We are not particularly "stuck" on the word "Rag," but as we were the original coiners of the word, we hate to see it mis-applied to every animal dance and passing popular song that "bobs" up; holds the spotlight for a moment; and then wabbles [sic] into outer darkness---never to return...The word "Rag" was originally used in connection with a stage dance, akin to the "Buck and Wing," and the music that accompanied it took the name."⁷⁷

In summary, although the migration of "rag" from a ball to a dance routine to a piece of music is still based on circumstantial evidence, my research has revealed no reasonable alternative source for "rag" in its terpsichorean and musical senses. I consider John Stark's chronology substantially verified.

"Ragtime" and Ben Harney

How did "ragtime" evolve from "rag"?

1896, 15 August: A brief newspaper review of a vaudeville program at the Milwaukee Academy of Music, praising the performance of pianist and entertainer Ben Harney, "the illustrator of real rag time music and comedy," may be "rag time's" first appearance in print.⁷⁸

1896, 6 September: The published review in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* of Harney's performance as an act of the Howard Athenaeum Star Specialty Company's vaudeville troupe at Hyde and Behman's theater in Brooklyn is significant:

The novelty of the performance is Ben R. Harvey [sic, Harney], who ought to interest students of American music and should have been seen and heard by Dr. Dvorak. He invents and plays what he calls rag time airs and dances, the effect of syncopations being to make the melody ragged. This is real American music; not of the highest order, but genuine. A brunette from South Carolina is with him, and the dances and cake walks of the two are quaint and good.⁷⁹

This review, calling his performance "real American music" and advocating it to Dr. Antonin Dvořák, who had been attempting to foster an American art music based on folk sources, was seminal. It introduced the word to the public and presaged an impending musical revolution.

The Star Specialty Company's vaudeville troupe toured widely in the East, Midwest, and South as far south as Sedalia, where it appeared at Wood's Opera House. Continuing enthusiastic newspaper reviews of Harney's performances disseminated the word "ragtime" widely in print thereby infusing the word into the lexicon.

1896, 15 October: The *Chicago Inter Ocean* hastens to explain "ragtime" to the uninitiated:

Word comes to the effect that "Down on the Ohio," a new song, has caught the popular fancy in New York. It is a pleasing negro melody, written by Edith Kingsley, the youngest songwriter on the American stage and the only woman in the world who plays what is known as "rag" time (a negro peculiarity in music) in public. Ben Harney and a number of other performers play the negro "patter" known as "rag time."⁸⁰

1896, 18 October: The prestigious *Chicago Daily Tribune* comments:

“Darky” music, both instrumental and vocal, is the reigning fad of the hour. Dvorak is indirectly responsible for this, say the music-men, and the negro music of the present time is vastly in advance of what it used to be. The old regular and monotonous “tum tum” of the supposed banjo has been supplanted by syncopated, or, in darky parlance, “rag” time, and the harmonics are much better than of old.”⁸¹

The *Tribune* seems to imply, erroneously, that “ragtime” the word was endemic in and migrated from black society.

In a 1928 newspaper interview Ben Harney claims credit for coining the word “rag time.” He explains how he adapted techniques of string instrument performance to the piano while a youth living in the Kentucky mining boom town of Middlesborough, described by one writer as a “social melting pot” where blacks and whites mingled freely:⁸²

[Because] I was just a youngster it wasn't long until I was in good standing with all the inhabitants and was invited to attend their dances, being about the only form of social recreation in which they indulged. It was at one of these dances that I first heard broken rhythm music *which I later named “ragtime”* [italics added].⁸³

Harney continues:

I could also sing a little, so I tried setting words to some of my ragtime piano compositions, my first song being “You Been a Good Ol’ Wagon but You Done Broke Down.” I wrote the words in ‘darky’ dialect because it was most suitable for the music...The words...were possibly inspired by a brand of Negro humor with which I was, of course, familiar.

Thus he admits, if grudgingly, that African-American culture had influenced his style.

Should we believe his claim? He was not known for his modesty. At one time, Harney's publicity machine had labelled him the "originator of ragtime," the musical style. He now became less assuming, admitting, "Instead of being the full-fledged father of ragtime, it would be more correct to speak of me as father by adoption."⁸⁴

This admission would seem to enhance his credibility. His claim is very persuasive. I have little doubt that he analogized "march time" and "waltz time," terms which had been current for many years, to form "rag time."

Ben Harney's Rag Time Instructor, published in 1897, comprises a group of six pieces in syncopated arrangements for piano without words including hymns, popular songs, and one instrumental composition, "Plantation Echoes" by Theodore Northrup. From the published reviews of his performances and from his instructor, I infer that Harney's ragtime performance repertoire comprised syncopated arrangements of his vocal compositions, popular songs of the day, and a few semi-classical instrumentals. Therefore, in a strict sense this can be said to have been the initial scope of "ragtime."

"Ragtime" quickly subsumed the notorious "coon song," a species of song with racially disparaging lyrics that had become popular on the minstrel and vaudeville stages. In 1901, one music writer decried, "popular usage has made 'coon song,' 'rag-time' and 'syncopation' synonymous terms, and we suppose that identification is so firmly established that any protest against it would be futile."⁸⁵

"Ragtime's" Boundaries Expand

From the time Ben Harney first offered the word "rag time" to the world, its scope began to expand. As early as 1903 Thomas Preston Brooke, conductor of the Marine Band, declared that while ragtime had been handicapped by what he considered an inelegant name, now "It is merely necessary to call a composition rag time to make it popular."⁸⁶ Edward Berlin observed, "the tendency by 1911 [was] to include in the ragtime category almost any rhythmical, popular music."⁸⁷ As famed ragtime entertainer and authority Max Morath put it, "'Ragtime' had become a show business cliché with no musical identity."⁸⁸

Ironically, the word “ragtime” even included embryonic jazz as it was evolving in New Orleans before the term “jazz” was introduced to music in 1915. Emile Christian, trombonist with the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, in a 1941 interview commented on the terminology that he had experienced as a youth there: “We called it ragtime then, but the kind of ragtime we played, that we heard everywhere, is the same as hot swing or jazz today.”⁸⁹

In an article in the *New Republic* 15 October 1916, respected music critic and ragtime enthusiast Hiram K. Moderwell challenged the array of critics who had belittled ragtime as “not new” and “merely syncopation which was used by Hayden and Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms. . .” His definition:

Ragtime is not merely syncopation. It is a certain sort of syncopation—namely, a persistent syncopation in one part conflicting with exact rhythm in another. But of course this definition is not enough. Ragtime has its flavor that no definition can imprison. No one would take the syncopation of a Hayden symphony to be American ragtime. ‘Certainly not’ replies the indignant musician. Nor the syncopation of any recognized composer. But if this is so, then ragtime *is* new.⁹⁰

Moderwell’s “typical ragtime program,” which he submitted “to the mercies of any singer who has the courage to use it” in the *Kansas City Star* in 1917, demonstrates how “ragtime’s” scope had broadened:

I.

“Roll Dem Cotton Bales”Johnson
“Waiting for the Robert E. Lee”Muir
“The Tennessee Blues”Warner
“The Memphis Blues”Handy

II.

“You May Bury Me in the East”Traditional
“Bendin’ Knees a-Achin’Traditional
“These Dead Bones Shall Rise Again”Traditional
“Play on Your Harp, Little David”Traditional

III.

"Nobody's Lookin' but the Owl and the Moon.....	Johnson
"Exhortation"	Cook
"Rain Song"	Cook

IV.

"Everybody's Doing It"	Berlin
"I Love a Piano"	Berlin
"When I Get Back to the U.S.A.".....	Berlin
"On the Beach at Wai-ki-ki"	Kern
"Ragtime Cowboy Joe"	Muir ⁹¹

Meanwhile John Stark, Scott Joplin's publisher, had begun promoting the adjective "classic" to distinguish the ragtime of composers in his catalog. His advertising revealed his purpose: "We mean what we say when we call these instrumental rags classic... They are the perfection of type."⁹² Ragtime historian and researcher Trebor Tichenor cited Scott Joplin's "The Cascades" of 1904 as probably the first to be advertised as "a classic."⁹³

The popular press quickly adopted the term "classic ragtime" for instrumental rags even if not published by Stark. Examples:

1905: An ad for a band concert at an Ogden, UT opera house promises, "For encores the band will play selections from the most popular works of modern composers, from sentimental ballads to classic ragtime."⁹⁴

1906: An article on afternoon band concerts at county seats in Kansas reports, "Selections from the latest classic ragtime were mostly in demand, and while the music was not at all intricate, some of it was played very well with invariable earnestness."⁹⁵

1911: An ad for Saunders Music Company of Ottawa, KS, offers a "Classic Ragtime Folio 8 good ones" for 75 cents."⁹⁶

1930: A radio program on WFBG Altoona, PA features a "classic group of compositions" played by pianist W.F. Maeder as well as a "classic ragtime

group, 'Maple Leaf Rag' by Scott [sic, Joplin]; 'Cannon Ball Rag,' and 'Speckled Spot [sic, Spider] Rag' by French."⁹⁷

But ragtime's glory days were numbered as the ragtime era closed and jazz became the new musical craze. At first, jazz was considered a form of ragtime. "You should hear the new 'jazz rag' productions in player rolls—Every owner of a player piano will want the famous drinking song 'Glorious', as played with the new 'jazz rag' arrangement" proclaimed one widely distributed ad in 1916.⁹⁸

Efforts to disengage "ragtime" and "jazz" began early but not always successfully. John Stark, Joplin's publisher, titled one of James Scott's rags from 1921 "Don't Jazz Me, I'm Music." Berlin found that during the late teens and the twenties, "Many writers used the terms ragtime and jazz almost synonymously" and cited examples from the magazine literature, but there were exceptions.⁹⁹ The 1928 headline of an extensive newspaper article reporting an interview with Ben Harney called him the "'Jazz' Originator" but the writer tried to clarify the matter in the text designating him "originator of the ragtime music from which jazz and modern syncopation was [sic] derived."¹⁰⁰

"Ragtime" Becomes a Genre

Although ragtime, the music, was no longer popular in the 1930s, "ragtime," the word, continued to appear occasionally in the popular press, which was beginning to treat ragtime, jazz, and the newly minted swing as distinct genres of music of equivalent status.

Paradoxically, "ragtime" and "swing," as predominantly notated music styles, were in that regard more akin to each other than was "jazz," a predominantly improvised music, to either; "swing," however, did include improvised solos.

In 1938 music columnist Maurice Ries wrote, "Jazz...swing...they're all the same. But don't confuse them with ragtime—that's something else, something a whole lot choppiier, a different kind of rhythm and a different kind of music altogether."¹⁰¹

A 1939 interview with noted composer Arthur Schwartz reported, "...today [he] is in the task of composing a song for his new and serious

operetta to show how popular music has developed from ragtime to jazz to swing."¹⁰²

In the black newspaper *Detroit Tribune* that same year, a piece entitled "Swinging to Fame" observed, "While swing has taken the day, ragtime and jazz, which preceded this lilting style of swing, was [sic] a production of colored musicians."¹⁰³

Thus was ragtime, the music, set for the first stage of the ragtime revival. According to historian John Edward Hasse, that stage began in the 1940's as an outgrowth of a traditional jazz revival movement initiated by Lu Watters and his Yerba Buena Jazz Band and his pianist Wally Rose.¹⁰⁴ He noted, "By the mid-1940s, jazz specialist magazines began publishing articles about Scott Joplin, Jelly Roll Morton, and other early figures."

With ragtime music thus resuscitated, in the early stages of the revival characteristics attributed to ragtime were strongly influenced by the criteria for instrumental jazz. Further, as Edward Berlin explained, "In the 1950s the ragtime song was no longer considered *real* ragtime; its primacy was lost as piano music (or instrumental versions of piano music) became the main concern of performers and writers."¹⁰⁵

As the ragtime revival proceeded, during the 1950's "ragtime" subsumed "honky-tonk," a pianistic style performed on sometimes gimmicked pianos by "a mythical group of back-room professors all pictured with dangling cigarettes, flashy vests, and sleeve garters and bearing such names as Joe 'Fingers' Carr, 'Knuckles' O'Toole, Willie 'The Rock' Knox, and 'Crazy Otto.'"¹⁰⁶ But the fad faded and the scope of "ragtime" narrowed as "classic ragtime" became the genre's major expression.

Thus "rag" and "ragtime" became firmly embedded in the lexicon, "rag" primarily connoting a piece of composed instrumental music characterized by a predominantly syncopated melody against a regular rhythmic bass, and "ragtime" connoting its genre. There they remain today.

APPENDIX

OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY (3rd ed.)

ENTRIES FOR:

RAGTIME; RAG n. (#5); TAG-RAG AND BOB-TAIL; TAG

RAGTIME

ragtime, n. and adj.

Origin: Apparently formed within English, by compounding. **Etymons:** rag n.⁵, time n.

Etymology: Apparently < rag n.⁵ + time n.

Originally U.S.

A. n.

1. A musical rhythm characterized by a syncopated melodic line and regularly accented accompaniment, evolved amongst African-American musicians in the 1890s; music of this type.

1896 B. Harney *You've been Good Old Wagon* (sheet music) (cover) Ben Harney... Original introducer to the stage of the now popular 'rag time' in Ethiopian song.

1899 *Musical Rec. (Boston)* 158/1 I feel safe in predicting that rag-time has come to stay.

1916 A. Huxley *Let.* 7 Aug. (1969) 109 I have been..spending most of the night in conversation or in singing folk-songs and rag-time to the stars.

[Then: 3 more attestations: 1938, 1968, 2007]

2. A piece of ragtime music, a ragtime song; = rag n.⁵ 2a.

1899 *Independent (N.Y.)* 1 June 1525/1 It plays sonatas, fugues, rag-times, gavottes, [etc.].

[Then: 3 more attestations: 1914, 1937, 2006]

B. adj.

1. Of the nature of, relating to, or associated with ragtime.

1896 *Yenowine's Illustr. News (Milwaukee)* 15 Aug. 7 The attractive vaudeville bill for the ensuing week includes Ben R. Harney, who is said to be a very clever illustrator of real negro rag-time music.

1900 *Musical Courier (N.Y.)* 23 May 20/1 (*heading*) The rag-time rage.

[Then: 7 more attestations: 1906, 1913, 1917, 1922, 1949, 1974, 2003]

2. *slang*. Disorderly; disreputable.

[1913 *Flight* 12 Apr. 416/1 A pilot who flies unsteadily is a 'rag-timer'.]

1917 F. T. Nettleingham *Tommy's Tunes* 42 We are the Ragtime Army, We are the R.F.C. We do not fight, we cannot fly, So what earthly use are we?

1919 H. Crane *Let.* 17 June (1965) 20 Your remarks 'about the ladies' really hurt me with a kind of ragtime vulgarity.

1926 F. M. Ford *Man could stand Up* ii. 119 A Hun up against a Tommie looked like a Holbein *lansknecht* fighting a music-hall turn. It made you feel that you were indeed a rag-time army.

1940 R. Graves & A. Hodge *Long Week-end* iii. 38 'Rag-time' was an adjective of reproach; a rag-time regiment was a disorderly and untrustworthy one.

1948 V. Palmer *Golconda* ii. 14 But what if some really big concern swallowed up the three ragtime companies and planned to open up the whole mountain?

1987 S. Zulauf *Succasunna New Jersey* 16 We rode this condemned killer Three weeks before it closed forever, A ragtime relic of rickety wooden girders That bore thousands each summer In a black train clacking to the top of its Play hill.

RAG. n.(#5)

rag, n.

Origin: Of uncertain origin.

Etymology: Origin uncertain and disputed.

In sense 2 perhaps shortened < *ragged* adj.¹, with allusion to the syncopated rhythm of the music. Compare *ragtime* n.

Originally U.S.

†1. A type of informal dancing party featuring music played by African-American string bands. *Obsolete*. There appears to be no specific connection between this sense and sense 2b.

1891 *Topeka (Kansas) Call* 16 Aug. 1/2 The Jordan hall 'rags', which are held in Tennessee town weekly, are a nuisance and should be abated.

1893 *Kansas City Star* 29 Dec. in L. Abbott & D. Seroff *Out of Sight* (2002) viii. 444/1 When an Atchison fiddler plays at a rag he always sits near the door so that he can get out when he hears the first fighting word.

1896 *Dial. Notes* 1 423 Rag, dance, ball. 'We can go to rags.'

2.

a. A musical composition written in ragtime; a ragtime tune.

1894 *Leavenworth (Kansas) Herald* 8 Dec. Kansas City girls can't play anything on pianos except 'rags', and the worst kind of 'rags' at that. 'The Bully' and 'Forty Drops' are their favorites.

1895 *Leavenworth (Kansas) Herald* 13 Apr. in L. Abbott & D. Seroff *Out of Sight* (2002) viii. 448/2 If the present 'rag' craze does not die out pretty soon, every young man in the city will be able to play some kind of a 'rag' and then call himself a piano player.

1896 E. Hogan *All Coons look alike to Me* (sheet music) 6 (*caption*) Choice Chorus with Negro 'Rag' Accompaniment.

1897 T. Turpin (*title of song*) Harlem rag: two step.

1922 T. S. Eliot *Waste Land* ii. 21 But O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—
It's so elegant So intelligent.

1947 G. Sklar *Two Worlds J. Truro* iii. 24 They listened to rags and stomps, to fox trots and marches.

1957 G. Lascelles in S. Traill *Concerning Jazz* 77 Few of the original rags were written, and those which were, had often no bass part added beyond the conventional harmonies.

1977 *New Yorker* 19 Sept. 96/2 She would play some Menotti, Barber, and Gershwin, a piece by Paul Tufts, a Seattle composer, and some Scott Joplin rags.

1991 *New Yorker* 14 Oct. 97/2 The Creole Jazz Band played rags and blues and novelty songs. Its ensembles were partly arranged and partly jammed.

2000 *Oxf. Amer.* Mar.–Apr. 122/1 When the fad for the newly emerging blues hit in the 1920s, the older African-American musicians who played the rags, breakdowns, dance tunes, and novelty songs on their fiddles and banjos found themselves passé.

b. A dance performed to ragtime music; a dancing party at which ragtime music is played. Now chiefly *historical*.

1899 *Musical Rec. (Boston)* 1 Apr. 158/1 The negroes call their clog-dancing, 'ragging', and the dance, a 'rag'.

1912 C. Porter *Compl. Lyrics* (1983) 12/1 Now there's a rag that everybody's doin'... There's a rag that Yale is turkey trottin'.

1998 T. C. Boyle *Riven Rock* 181 She'd just danced a rag with Bulter Ames.

2000 *Sat. Evening Post* May–June 30/2 They could go to a rag or a romp and drag a hoof to the latest jazz music.

TAG-RAG AND BOB-TAIL 'the common herd, the rabble'
in *OED3*: under *bob-tail*

5. *collectively*. [Perhaps referring to 2 and 3.] tag-rag and bob-tail, or tag, rag, and bob-tail: the common herd, the rabble. Also *plural*. See *tag* n.¹

1660 S. Pepys *Diary* 6 Mar. (1970) I. 78 The dining-room..was full of tag, rag, and bobtail, dancing, singing, and drinking.

1786 'P. Pindar' *Lyric Odes for 1785* (new ed.) ii. 8 Tagrags and Bobtails of the sacred Brush!

1800 P. Colquhoun *Treat. Commerce & Police R. Thames* ii. 75 That lowest class of the community who are vulgarly denominated the Tag-Rag and Bobtail.

1820 Ld. Byron *Blues* ii. 23 The rag, tag, and bobtail of those they call 'Blues'.

1835 J. Hogg *Tales Wars Montrose* I. 105 The tag-rag and bob-tail part of the citizens of Edinburgh.

1841 C. Dickens *Barnaby Rudge* xxxv. 134 We don't take in no tagrag and bobtail at our house.

1926 J. Black *You can't Win* xiii. 180 She poured liquor into the bums, beggars, ragtags and bobtails that hung around the saloons.

TAG n.¹, meaning #10

†10.

a. The masses; people of the lowest social status. *Obsolete*.

a1616 W. Shakespeare *Coriolanus* (1623) iii. i. 247 Will you hence, Before the Tagge returne?

a1825 R. Forby *Vocab. E. Anglia* (1830) *Tag*, the rabble.

†b. *esp.* in collocation with rag n.² 11: tag and rag (*depreciative*) all the components of the masses or those of lower social status; a gathering of people held in low esteem; all and any, every man Jack, everybody, Tom, Dick, and Harry. *Obsolete*. See also tag-rag n., adj., and adv.

c1535 F. Bygod *Treat. Impropriations* (K.O.) Your fathers were wyse, both tagge and rag.

1554 H. Machyn *Diary* (1848) 50 Hunttyd, and kyllyd tage and rage with honds and swords.

1566 J. Partridge *Worthie Hystorie Plasidas* 1041 To walles they go, both tagge and rage, their Citie to defende.

1610 A. Cooke *Pope Joane in Harl. Misc.* (Malh.) IV. 95 That you have made Levites..of the scurvy and scabbed, of the lowest of the people, tag and rag.

a1626 L. Andrewes *Serm.* (1641) 181 This is the time when all hypocrites, atheists, tag and rag come.

18.. R. Southey *Devil's Walk* xxiii With music of fife and drum, And a consecrated flag, And shout of tag and rag, And march of rank and file.

1809 W. Irving *Hist. N.Y.* II. vi. viii. 163 Every Tag having his Rag at his side, to finish his pipe..and laugh at his flights of immortal dullness.

ENDNOTES

¹ Fred Hoeptner is a retired engineer with a longtime passionate interest in ragtime. He has presented lectures on ragtime history at the Scott Joplin, West Coast, and Sutter Creek Festivals, and those lectures form the basis of the present study. He thanks Scott Joplin biographer, Dr. Edward Berlin, for his encouragement of this endeavor. Also Hoeptner was one of the founders of the John Edwards Memorial Foundation, a non-profit associated with the U. of California at Los Angeles, formed to foster the academic study of early American folk and hillbilly music. Today its archive is part of the U. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Southern Folklife Collection.

² In general, orthographically "ragtime" began as a word pair which was then hyphenated and finally fused, but there was little consistency until well into the ragtime era. This essay will generally use the fused form "ragtime."

³ Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They All Played Ragtime* hereinafter abbreviated *TAPR* in endnotes (New York: First Grove Press Edition Revised, 1959), 13.

⁴ I define the "ragtime era" as 1896-1917, the period when ragtime flourished as the dominant form of popular music. In mid-1896 the word "ragtime" first appeared in print (as "rag time") becoming commonplace by the year end. In 1918 the count of newspaper appearances of "jazz" overtook the count of "ragtime."

⁵ Benjamin R. Harney, "Preface," *Ben Harney's Rag Time Instructor*, arr. Theodore H. Northrup (Chicago: Sol Bloom, 1897).

⁶ Examples include *Baltimore Sun* 10 November 1898, 7; *Lawrence Daily Journal* (KS) 27 December 1898, 4; *Los Angeles Times* 1 January 1899, 12; *Detroit Free Press* 28 April 1899, 4; *Tampa Tribune*, 3 May 1899, 4.

⁷ *Chicago Daily Tribune* and *Philadelphia Times* 12 March 1899, 2 and 18 respectively.

⁸ Blesh and Janis, *TAPR*, 17.

⁹ Rupert Hughes, "A Eulogy of Ragtime," *Musical Record*, 1 April 1899, 158.

¹⁰ "What Is Rag Time?," *Music Trade Review* vol. XXVIII #18 6 May 1899, 39.

¹¹ "Questions and Answers," *Etude* 18 (February 1900), 52; quoted in Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 31, endnote 29.

¹² Floyd Levin, "The American Jazz Scene," *Jazz Journal* Feb. 1950, 13. Levin identified his source as James P. Johnson to scholar, pianist, and composer Galen Wilkes per personal communication.

¹³ Terry Waldo, *This Is Ragtime* (New York: Hawthorn, 1976, 4; and New York: Jazz at Lincoln Center Library Edition, 2009), 4.

¹⁴ David A. Jasen and Trebor Jay Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime: A Musical History* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 2. Identical text was republished in David A. Jasen, *Ragtime: an Encyclopedia, Discography, and Sheetography* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 190.

- ¹⁵ Berlin, *Ragtime*, 29.
- ¹⁶ Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular Music 1889-1895* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2002), 443.
- ¹⁷ Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, 443.
- ¹⁸ *Roanoke Daily Times*, 30 March 1890.
- ¹⁹ 1829, 1830, 1835, 1837, 1838, 1839, 1852, 1853, 1857, 1864, 1867, 1873, 1876, 1879, 1880, 1881, 1885, 1886, 1887, 1888, 1889, 1890, 1895, 1896, 1897, 1898, 1899, and 1900.
- ²⁰ In an alternate scenario, sometimes an attributive noun eventually joins with its primary noun to form a compound word as happened with “toothbrush” and “ragtime.”
- ²¹ *Baltimore Patriot*, 28 February 1829, 3.
- ²² *Baltimore Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, 4 March 1829, 2.
- ²³ www.in2013dollars.com › U.S. dollars › accessed 30 April 2018.
- ²⁴ *Boston Daily Advertiser* 13 March 1829.
- ²⁵ *Adams Sentinel* (Gettysburg, PA), 24 March 1830, 3.
- ²⁶ *American & Commercial Daily Advertiser* (Baltimore, MD) 2 June 1830, 4.
- ²⁷ *Baltimore Patriot*, 13 Feb. 1830, 3.
- ²⁸ *United States Telegraph* (Wash. D.C.), 25 March 1830, 2; *United States Telegraph* (Wash. D.C.) 25 Feb. 1835, 2.
- ²⁹ *Albany Argus* (NY), 22 Nov. 1837.
- ³⁰ *Baltimore Sun*, 17 April 1838, 3.
- ³¹ *Louisville Daily Courier*, 7 Jan. 1852.
- ³² The word “trod” must refer to a vehicle, but it is not clear which one; “trod” as a noun does not appear in OED3.
- ³³ “A Rag-Gatherers’ Ball,” *Leavenworth (KS) Bulletin* 19 November 1864, 2.
- ³⁴ *Baltimore Sun*, 19 Feb. 1870, 2.
- ³⁵ *Albany Evening Times* (Albany, NY) 27 March 1877.
- ³⁶ *Baltimore Sun*, 4 February 1879, 4.
- ³⁷ *Kansas City Star*, 4 Feb. 1881, 4.
- ³⁸ *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 3 Feb. 1881, 4; *The State Journal* (Jefferson City), 11 Feb. 1881; *Jefferson City Daily Tribune*, 3 Feb. 1881; respectively.
- ³⁹ *Salt Lake City Daily Tribune*, 8 February 1887, 2.
- ⁴⁰ OED3 says of *bouton*, meaning #1: “In *pearl bouton*, *bouton pearl*, anglicization of [French] *perle bouton*, a round pearl with a flat back marking the place where it was attached to the shell.” In this article, *bouton* seems to refer to the upper crust of society.
- ⁴¹ *Freeport (IL) Journal-Standard*, 16 August 1888, 4.
- ⁴² *The Daily Republican* (Monongahela PA), 30 August 1889, 1.

⁴³ *Dialect Notes* volume 1, University of Alabama Press, 1890, 423; available online at <https://books.google.com/books?id=wrAmAQAAIAAJ&focus=searchwithinvolume&q=rag>.

⁴⁴ *The Topeka Call* 16 August 1891, 1, "City News." Abbott and Seroff refer to the newspaper as *The Topeka Weekly Call*, but the masthead reads merely *The Topeka Call*. Further, they agglomerate Tennessee town as one word whereas the newspaper prints it as two words.

⁴⁵ 20 October 1893, 4.

⁴⁶ Edward A. Berlin, *King of Ragtime*, second edition, Oxford University Press, 2016, 47.

⁴⁷ *Kansas City Star*, 29 December 1893, 4.

⁴⁸ "Hanging out the Rent Rag," *Kansas City Star*, 6 February 1895, 3.

⁴⁹ *The Courier* (Lincoln NE), 20 April 1895, 8.

⁵⁰ *Leavenworth Herald* 2 November 1895, 3.

⁵¹ Okeh 8396-A.

⁵² "Letters from the People," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 12 November 1901, 6.

⁵³ *Pittsburgh Dispatch* 3 Feb. 1889, 11.

⁵⁴ *Omaha Daily Bee*, 10 April 1887, 2.

⁵⁵ *Omaha Daily Herald*, 16 December 1888, Section 2, 9.

⁵⁶ *Osage City Free Press* (Osage City, KS), 28 February 1889, 5.

⁵⁷ *Salina Daily Republican* (KS) 29 November 1889, 4.

⁵⁸ *Fort Scott* (KS) *Daily Tribune* 29 July 1891, 5.

⁵⁹ *Atchison Daily Globe*, 22 April 1892, 2.

⁶⁰ "Kansas Notes," *Kansas City Star*, 11 Dec. 1894, 4.

⁶¹ Abbott and Seroff, *Out of Sight*, 448.

⁶² *Lehi* (UT) *Banner* 20 December 1894.

⁶³ "Everybody Rag," *Yakima Herald*, 10 Sept. 1896; *New York Herald*, 24 November 1896, 5th Section, 3.

⁶⁴ *Santa Cruz Evening News*, 23 August 1913, 1.

⁶⁵ *The Times* (Philadelphia, PA), 8 October 1899, 30.

⁶⁶ "Shin-plaster" was a pejorative for a paper bill of small value which had been issued in 1837 to counter the hoarding of coinage.

⁶⁷ The piece is dedicated to E. Dexter Loveridge of Buffalo, NY, promoter of a widely advertised patent medicine Wahoo Bitters.

⁶⁸ Berlin, *Ragtime*, 83.

⁶⁹ One set of modern writers has excluded pieces exhibiting only untied, or cakewalk, syncopation from the ragtime genre; see Jasen and Tichenor, *Rags and Ragtime*, 16. Identical text was retained in Jasen, *Ragtime: an Encyclopedia*, 198. This exclusion is historically unjustified.

⁷⁰ <https://sites.google.com/site/winansbjo/learning-black-banjo-syncopation>.

- ⁷¹ *San Francisco Call*, 14 May 1893, 7.
- ⁷² *Leavenworth Herald*, 8 Dec. 1894, 3.
- ⁷³ *Leavenworth Herald*, 13 April 1895, 3.
- ⁷⁴ John Edward Hasse, "Ragtime from the Top," in *Ragtime: Its History, Composers, and Music*, ed. John Edward Hasse (New York: Schirmer Books, 1985), 10.
- ⁷⁵ One set of modern writers contends that this piece is not "ragtime"; see endnote 69.
- ⁷⁶ Blesh and Janis, *TAPR*, 23.
- ⁷⁷ *American Magazine* 11 Oct. 1914; reproduced in facsimile in *The Ragtimer* (periodical of the Ragtime Society, Weston, Ontario, Canada), vol. 6 no. 1, April 1967, 24.
- ⁷⁸ *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* 15 Aug. 1896, 3.
- ⁷⁹ *Brooklyn Eagle* 6 September 1896, 4.
- ⁸⁰ *The Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL), 15 Oct. 1896, 4.
- ⁸¹ *Chicago Tribune* 18 Oct. 1896, 43.
- ⁸² William H. Tallmadge, "Ben Harney: The Middlesborough Years, 1890-93," *American Music* (Summer 1995): 167-194, at 171.
- ⁸³ Henry K. Burton, "Ben R. Harney, 'Jazz' Originator, Tells about Its Introduction," *Indianapolis Star*, 22 January 1928, Section 8, 3.
- ⁸⁴ Burton, "Ben R. Harney."
- ⁸⁵ "A Symposium on Coon Songs," *Rochester (NY) Democrat and Chronicle*, 26 March 1901, 6.
- ⁸⁶ *Eau Claire Leader Eau Claire*, Wisconsin, 13 October 1903, 3.
- ⁸⁷ Berlin, *Ragtime*, 12.
- ⁸⁸ Max Morath, oral presentation, West Coast Ragtime Festival 17 Nov. 2017.
- ⁸⁹ Arthur Halliburton, *New Orleans Times-Picayune* 8 October 1941, 3.
- ⁹⁰ Hiram K. Moderwell, *New Republic* 15 Oct. 1915, 284.
- ⁹¹ *Kansas City Star*, 24 July 1917, 7.
- ⁹² Reproduced in facsimile without date in *Ragtimer* vol. 6 no. 1, April 1967, 23.
- ⁹³ Trebor Jay Tichenor, "John Stillwell Stark, Piano Ragtime Publisher: Readings from 'The Intermezzo' and His Personal Ledgers, 1905-1908." *Black Music Research Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1989, 193-204, at 202.
- ⁹⁴ *Ogden (UT) Standard*, 25 April 1905, 8.
- ⁹⁵ *Summerfield (KS) Sun* 28 May 1906, 6.
- ⁹⁶ *The Evening Herald* (Ottawa, KS) 21 December 1911, 6.
- ⁹⁷ *Altoona Tribune* (Altoona, PA) 8 February 1930, 18.
- ⁹⁸ *Quad-City Times* (Davenport, IA) 27 November 1916, 10.
- ⁹⁹ See Berlin, *Ragtime*, 14-17, for a thorough discussion.
- ¹⁰⁰ Burton, "Ben R. Harney."
- ¹⁰¹ Maurice Ries, *Montana Standard*, 6 November 1938, 50.
- ¹⁰² Mark Barron, *Springfield Republican* (IL) 8 August 1939, 5.

¹⁰³ *Detroit Tribune* 19 August 1939, 15.

¹⁰⁴ John Edward Hasse, 34.

¹⁰⁵ Berlin, *Ragtime*, 177.

¹⁰⁶ Terry Waldo, *This Is Ragtime* (Hawthorn) 157; and (Jazz at Lincoln Center Edition) 174.

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