

coloured people were sitting around talking. I played my *Sensation* first and they began to crowd around and watch me. When I had finished, Joplin said "That's a good rag — a regular negro rag". That was what I wanted to hear."

Well, best conclude with another quote from Jo Lamb, this time talking about himself . . . "I didn't want to be in the

music business . . . I wanted to keep my music in my private life. I didn't want to make any money on my things. I only wanted to see them published because my dream was to be a great ragtime composer."

Joseph Francis Lamb . . . your dreams have come true.

arranged by J. James

ALASKAN RAG

J. LAMB

INTRO.

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FIRST SECTION

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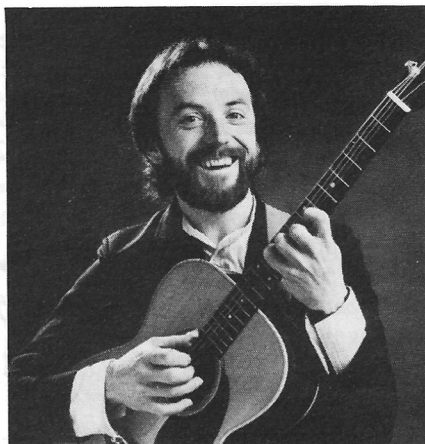
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RAGTIME GUITAR



by

JOHN JAMES

In 1900 ragtime was a national craze in America. With a piano in every parlour, families would gather around the upright and enjoy the latest offering, hot off the presses of 'Tin Pan Alley'. This was the first mass commercial music market and out of New York came shabby attempts at an imitation of the real thing — classic ragtime. The white folks set about popularising a black music idiom, with the ironic result — because of the cheap trash being churned out 'down the alley' — that the young gifted black composers of the day did not want to be associated with the term 'ragtime'. They were afraid of the stigma attached to the term, being regarded as low class negro music. Thus, misinformed they missed out on the real thing, i.e. Joplin, James Scott, Joseph Lamb and many others.

Classic ragtime is a term I have used many times in this series, and have, in fact, selected the study pieces and charted the history to represent it. Now, I feel I must define it more clearly, and to do so, how better than to quote Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis from their indispensable tome *They All Played Ragtime*.

"Although ragtime originated on the folk level, several outstandingly gifted composers of both races carried the music to a creative level that can only be termed classical. The term while a just one, admittedly has the fault that it may be confused with our ordinary use of 'classical' to denote the work of the great European composers. It is necessary to use it, nevertheless, to describe the work of men like Scott Joplin, James Scott, Joseph Lamb and others. The reader should therefore understand that where ragtime is termed classical it is meant that the syncopated music thus described is highly articulated and developed along ragtime's own lines, and not that it is in any way necessary similar to, or in imitation of, the classics of European music. The term 'classic' as applied to piano ragtime has, in fact, the sanction of long usage. It was first employed early in this century by the pioneer ragtime publisher John Stark. By 1912 it was a commonly accepted term and was not confused by reference to European music."

When referring to classic ragtime in this series, three names have cropped up time and time again. Joplin and Scott we have already studied, the third is, perhaps, the most interesting of them all. Joseph Francis Lamb was born in Montclair, New Jersey on the sixth December 1887, and is the thorn in the side of musicologists who enjoy theorising on how styles of playing develop and evolve . . . and why! Until, in 1958, when Lamb was discovered alive and well in Brooklyn, many thought that due to the way he composed his ragtime, he was in fact black. He was white. Here was a white musician understanding the genre so perfectly, for his compositions to be compared with those of the recognised innovators, and to be considered, in musical terms, a negro. It can be said that Lamb's rags are not very technical. True, it does not take a great deal of pianistic dexterity to play them. However this is not surprising when you consider that he had not experienced the all night long cutting contests in the St. Louis sporting houses, where, no doubt, such techniques were developed. Also his rags lack emotional complexity, again this is not surprising, when,

fortunately, Lamb did not suffer the disturbing and often turbulent life style of, say, Joplin or Louis Chauvin. But nevertheless, I find Lamb's pieces very moving; being melodically lyrical and harmonically lucid.

When Lamb was rediscovered in 1958, a New York publisher printed a collection of his works under the title 'Ragtime Treasures' claiming that it was "simply beautiful music . . . confirming their creator's place with the immortals of American music. "The same publishing house in 1917 rejected Lamb's music and asked "Can't you write novelettes like 'Nola'? That's what they want!"

Joseph Lamb the white ragtime composer; nearest to the Joplin classicism; the exception to the rule; the New Jersey phenomenon is the only classic ragtime master not born or brought up in the folk rag area of the Southern States. He wrote rags that were thoroughly negroid and worthy to stand with the very best. He did this without copying, it was simply a musical form he had heard and liked, and felt a desire to express himself in that way. He had the ability to adopt another man's style — Joplin's — and channel his own creative talents through this style, without inhibiting his own personal ideas. Jo Lamb then is a very important figure in the history of ragtime music, because he broke down-knowingly or not-the barriers of colour prejudice and social status. His rediscovery, in the late fifties also meant that many gaps in the documentation of the history of the music could be filled in. So many of his contemporaries had long passed away and being a survivor he could relate first hand accounts on the characters and personalities of the ragtime era. The following is a typical one. It was in 1907 that a young Jo Lamb went into the New York office of John Stark to buy some new rags. He was already known as a good customer and received a discount! Lamb picks up the story . . . "There was this coloured fellow sitting there with his foot bandaged up as if he had the gout, and a crutch beside him. I hardly noticed him. I told Mrs. Stark that I liked the Joplin rags best and wanted to get any I didn't have. The coloured fellow spoke up and asked whether I had certain pieces which he named. I thanked him and bought several and was leaving when I said to Mrs. Stark that Joplin was one fellow I would certainly like to meet.

"Really", said Mrs. Stark, "Well, here's your man." I shook hands with him, needless to say. It was a thrill I've never forgotten. I had met Scott Joplin and was going home to tell the folks.

"Mrs. Stark told him I had sent in a couple of rags for their approval. I had, all right, and they had come back two days later. Joplin seemed interested and asked if he could walk up the street with me. We walked along Twenty-third Street and into Madison Square Park and sat on a bench.

"Mr. Joplin asked if my rags were really good". I said; "To me they seem all right. Maybe they are not, I don't know". He invited me to bring them over to his place. Needless to say I didn't waste time.

"I went to his boarding house a few evenings later and he asked me to play my pieces on the piano in the parlour. A lot of