

CALLIOPE RAG

JAMES SCOTT

arr. John James

6th to D

INTRO.

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obscurity. During the cold winter of 1938 he became very ill and refused to go to hospital or even see a doctor. On 1 March, his birthday, Ben Harney died. He was buried in an unmarked

grave. The man who, through his success in New York in 1896 had pushed ragtime to greater popular acceptance, had departed for that "Cake walk in the Sky".

CALLIOPE RAG

(Second Section)

James Scott
arr. John James

6th to D

3 3 3 0 8 7 10 7 5 H7 P5 0 5 H7 P5 0 5 H7 P5 0 7 5 0

3 3 3 0 8 7 10 7 6 6 7 6 6

5 5 5 10 7 0 7 0 0

7 7 6 7 H8 5 8 7 8 7 0 3 5 4 5

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7 7 6 7 H8 5 8 7 8 0 8 19 8 19 8 19

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RAGTIME GUITAR



by

JOHN JAMES

Scott Joplin and Tom Turpin head the first generation of classic ragtime composers. The next generation consists of those born in the 1880's, and it is at one of these second generation men that I would like to draw your attention to this month. However, it is worth mentioning that there were, of course, many first rate players and composers who, due to the lack of historical data, have disappeared with the passing of time. It is easy to forget that the opportunities for a white composer were indeed far greater than for his black counterpart, however it is doubtful that any circumstances could have prevented the genius of Scott Joplin from attaining recognition and the premier position that he deserved. Joplin is number one, now I want to tell you about number two.

James Scott was born in the tiny town of Neosho, Missouri in 1886. His parents, James and Mollie Scott had come from North Carolina and their humble household stood, unfortunately, way down the social ladder. There was no mention of the birth in any newspapers or town records, little did they know that that day would always commemorate the birth of ragtime's second greatest composer. When James was thirteen years old and already an accomplished pianist, his family moved to Ottawa, Kansas. In the new town he would be near his cousin who owned a cabinet organ upon which the young James could practise. Up until now it had been a case of genius surviving all adversity, for the family did not have a piano!

It is indeed quite incredible that into this poor family was born a child with the gift of perfect pitch and a wonderful pianistic ability . . . even Mozart had a piano! His only chance had been to play at his piano teacher's place, who was an old negro called John Coleman and about whom we know very little. Eventually, when the family moved again, this time to Carthage, which is situated in the South West of Missouri, his father bought his talented son a piano. However, to pay for it the whole family had to go out and work. Such was the dire economic situation of the Scott household that even little James, all five foot four of him, had to take up the appointment of window washer at the local music emporium. This was after an almost obligatory spell as a shoe-shine boy in a barber shop. So there he was a pianistic genius, sixteen years old cleaning windows. Now, we are fortunate in having first-hand information about James Scott, thanks to the survival and co-operation of his brothers and sisters and their willingness to talk to musicologists over the years. However poetic licence must I feel be granted when considering remembrances like the following. One day, in Dumas's Music Store, our hero who was being taught the art of picture framing . . . a side line of the store . . . and in a moment of despair, did sneak out the back. The owner suddenly heard beautiful music pouring out of the stock room. He peeped in expecting to see a prospective customer only to be greeted with the sight of his young employee at the keys.

"Can you read music?", the young Scott was asked.

"Yes sir . . . read and play", he declared, proudly.

Well, from that day on he washed no more windows, well, so

they say, and became the firm's top piano demonstrator, playing the shop's stock of sheet music. Eventually in March 1903, when James was seventeen Dumas published his composition 'A Summer Breeze' — March and Two-Step and followed this the next year with 'On the Pike March' a tune in celebration of the St. Louis Exposition.

During this period James Scott travelled to St. Louis and of course, met his ragtime peer Scott Joplin. He also met publisher John Stark who was very impressed with the young man's compositions, the inevitable outcome of this meeting was for James Scott to leave all his friends and relatives in Carthage and move to St. Louis. He was now twenty eight years old. Success came through the Stark publishing house in the form of *Climax Rag* in 1914. In the meantime don't forget Scott had written such classics as *The Fascinator* (1903) *Frog's Legs* (1906) *Grace and Beauty* (1910) *Hilarity Rag* (1910) and the exquisite *Ragtime Oriole* (1911).

The secular, iniquitous night life that was readily available to a piano player in St. Louis at this time, obviously did not appeal to Scott, for pretty soon he left for Kansas City where he married, settled down and began teaching music.

He attained the position of organist and musical arranger at the Panama Theatre and remained there for fifteen years. During this time he formed an eight piece band that stayed together well into the Thirties playing at dances and other social functions. Despite being off the ragtime scene proper, Scott continued to compose classic rags which rated second only to Joplin, but many of these masterpieces were never published or recorded and are presumed lost forever.

Nora, his wife, died childless, therefore leaving the ragtime master with his beloved grand piano and pet dog only to keep him company. His health was poor and apparently in a condition of chronic dropsy. Ruth Callahan, his cousin, with whom Scott was now living, recalls; "James kept on composing and playing although his fingers were swollen and very painful"

August 30 1938, James Sylvester Scott, aged fifty two, died at Douglas Hospital. Two days later his body was laid beside that of his wife. If it sounds to you that he died a broken man, well so be it, but I am going to leave you with a recollection of a ragtime master in his prime from his cousin Patsy . . . "Jimmy never talked about his music, just wrote, wrote, wrote and played it for anyone who would listen. He wrote music as fluently as writing a letter humming and writing all at the same time. He liked playing as many notes as possible under one beat with the right hand. I remember his hands so well; short fingers square at the ends, very thin finger nails, cut very short — fingers that fairly danced as they covered the fingerboard. He sat at the piano with the left leg wrapped around the stool and his body kept very still, no bouncing with the rhythm as one sees today. His music thrilled me. Often, today, when I hear his pieces on the radio if I close my eyes, I can still see his fingers flying over the keys" Ah, yes cousin Patsy . . . so can I.

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by
JOHN JAMES

In 1911 ragtime was sailing on a new wave of popularity. This revival was sparked off by Irving Berlin's hit *Alexander's Ragtime Band*. Ironically it was the same year that saw Scott Joplin at breaking point, both financial and mental, due to his incessant striving towards the completion and presentation of his opera *Treemonisha*. It was a mere dozen years after the success of *Maple Leaf Rag* and classic rags were out of favour with a fickle public, who now wanted to hear what was merely a Tin Pan Alley representation of the form. A diluted drink for the mass palate!

The classic ragtimers who had been persevering all this time to attain recognition for their art form were brushed aside by a torrent of raggy tunes; novelty numbers; a deluge of soon-to-be-forgotten musical popcorn that fell off the assembly line in the 'alley'. The product was consumed by a new generation; a generation that was unaware of the likes of Joplin, Scott and Turpin. They took this 'ragtime' to be the real thing and unfortunately this misinformed view was carried through to the next generation. So it was generally accepted that Irving Berlin and his mates down the alley invented ragtime, however we know that it had already been invented in 1896, by Ben Harney. Who?

The night that New York went wild over a twentyfive year old white piano player from Kentucky, marked the breakthrough to a sophisticated white audience of this style of 'Jig-piano'. This was still a couple of years before the term ragtime was first coined. It was 1896, the year that Benjamin Robertson Harney put himself on the map with hits such as *You've been a Good Old Wagon but You Done Broke Down, Mr. Johnson* (turn me loose), followed a little while later by *Cakewalk in the Sky*.

Ben Harney was born in Middleboro, Kentucky on 1 March 1871 and, despite his mammoth contribution to the development and popularity of ragtime, his name is rarely mentioned when the history of the music is recalled. Yet he remains an important figure, being a white person with an uncanny understanding of a music said to belong to another culture to that of his own. He pioneered his music on a popular level when other ragtime innovators were prevented from doing so because of the colour of their skin. Harney was only seventeen when he first wrote the song that was to make his name all over the U.S.A.; his old friend in Louisville, Kentucky, Brunar Greenup, recalls . . . "Ben managed to sit at the piano with a cane in one hand or the other and did a sort of tap dance with one or both feet and the cane. He came to my store one day and asked me to publish a song that he had put together. The song, now historic, was, *You've been a Good Old Wagon but You Done Broke Down*. It was the first syncopated song to be published in America. That is absolutely true . . ."

If publication for the first ragtime song was not enough, Harney's next song, *Mr. Johnson* was the first blues to be available in written form.

Obviously not content with these entries in the history books, in 1897 Ben Harney published *The Ragtime Instructor*.

This was the first book of studies for this music, predating Joplin's *The School of Ragtime — Six exercises for piano* by eleven years. Harney laid wild claims at being the inventor of this style of piano playing; the cover of the tutor declared "Original Instructor to the Stage of the Now Popular Ragtime in Ethiopian Song". Well, despite this belief in himself, his contribution was just another step in the general development of ragtime from a folk music to a sophisticated popular form. Joplin, however had aspirations towards the conservatoire and the academy. Harney's *Ragtime Instructor* claimed to give full instructions on how to play ragtime, but with a few pianistic exercises and arrangements of *Come Thou Fount* and *The Man that Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo*, it indeed fell short of such a claim. However, Ben Harney's live act proved very popular and he was one of the very few entertainers from that era to travel overseas. He claimed to have made . . . "three trips around the big globe . . ." and in his home town of Louisville, the local newspaper declared that he had 'hit it big' in Britain and . . . China! A quite amazing feat when you consider it was 1916. Unfortunately his status in his home country suffered, his overseas success was not reflected in America. His claim to be the inventor of ragtime was challenged and thus the whole derivation of the music. The moguls who ran Tin Pan Alley had dreamed up some story that suited their tin-pot music, and Harney was forced to answer the challenges. Amongst other things, he put forward this theory of the origination of syncopated music on the piano:-

"Real ragtime on the piano, played in such a manner that it cannot be put into notes is the contribution of the graduated Negro banjo-player who cannot read music. On the banjo there is a short string that is not fretted and that consequently is played open with the thumb. It is frequently referred to as the thumb string. The coloured performer strumming in his own cajoling way, likes to throw in a note at random and his thumb ranges over for this effect. When he takes up the piano the desire for the same effect dominates him, being almost second nature, and he reaches for the open banjo string note with his little finger. Meanwhile he is keeping mechanically perfect time with his left hand. The hurdle with the right hand little finger throws the tune off its stride, resulting in syncopation. He is playing two different times at once."

Well, make of that explanation what you will, if you can figure it out! It must contain some element of truth, so, what about the hypothesis that these banjo players may also have picked up the guitar, giving some credence to the claim that the guitar is indeed an original ragtime instrument and not simply one for transposed arrangements?

It is surprising that, despite Ben Harney's great love and understanding for the form, he did not compose any full length classic rags, instead he wrote a whole collection of 'raggy-songs'. With the success or failure of these, he survived and the good times came and went until 1930, when he and his devoted wife were living in a small flat in a decrepit area of Philadelphia. The following years were ones of hardship and