

## SCOTT JOPLIN RAGTIME FESTIVAL 2006

By Fred Hoepfner

Sedalia's annual transformation into a musical fantasyland went off superbly this year with only a minor hitch or two. The greatest ragtime show on earth opened Wednesday, May 31, and ended Sunday, June 4, having presented seven formal concerts, a dance, ten symposium sessions, almost continuous daily free performances at five sites scattered about town, two ragtime dinners and a brunch, and uncounted hours of after hours sessions at the Best Western. The performance committee—Bill Long, Sue Keller, and John Petley—had outdone themselves signing, according to my count (although I doubtless missed a few), 62 acts (individual performers and ensembles).

As always, devotees from throughout the world converged to revel in the pleasures of ragtime, stride, and associated syncopated genres. Junichi Tomono and his "significant other" from Tokyo, Japan, perhaps traveled the farthest. The friendliness that they encountered in Sedalia and the accessibility of the musicians particularly impressed them.

Major scheduling and venue changes were inaugurated this year, admittedly as an experiment. Wednesday featured all-day entertainment in the lounge at the State Fair Community College with the afternoon "Kickoff Concert" occupying the college's elegant and comfortable Stauffacher Theater. The major concerts were moved from Friday and Saturday evenings at the fairgrounds to Wednesday and Thursday evenings at the Smith-Cotton High School auditorium, and the dance from the fairgrounds to Friday evening at the high school cafeteria. The former "late night, red light" ragtime music hall concert was moved to an earlier hour Saturday evening at the high school. Other concerts remained at Liberty Center auditorium. Not renting the fairgrounds facilities reportedly saved the foundation \$6,000 in rental and insurance costs but elicited some grumbling about uncomfortable seats, muddy acoustics (especially in the balcony), and lack of alcohol sales at the high school.

### Wednesday: Kickoff Day

Kickoff day at the college evoked a relaxed, informal introduction to the festival as listeners sat at tables, some eating, enjoying the music in the bright and airy ambiance. The parade of performers ranged the gamut from a contingent of younger players new to the festival to established veterans. Mike Schwimmer, accompanying pianist Terry Parrish on his midget washboard, imparted a bit of philosophy introducing "The Smiler:" "Percy Wenrich wrote music that you go away whistling while most music these days you simply want to go away." Glenn Jenks rendered this year's theme rag, Joplin's "Antoinette," actually not a rag but a 6/8 march, commenting on its difficulty, "It's considered by most pianists to be unplayable."

The afternoon "Kickoff Concert" at the adjoining theater featured "Women in Ragtime" emceed by Sue Keller. A trio of women, Sue and Patsy Madinger on two pianos and Washboard Kitty, led off with "Antoinette." Anne Barnhart, flute, accompanied by Sue Keller, essayed the obscure Joe Lamb waltz "Mignon" and Dorothy Wall's "Diablo Rag." Nora Hulse in elegant period dress followed with two of her discoveries, "Pudge" by Hazel Million and "Volcanic Rag" by Leah Monks Robb. Mimi Blais played several May Aufderhyde favorites, fashioning "Blue Ribbon Rag" in a classical mold. Vocalist Carol Barnes rendered ragtime songs Berlin's "Oh, That Beautiful Rag" and Van Alstyne's "Sailing Away on the Henry Clay" in duet with Sue Keller, the second piece including a bump-and-grind routine that generated audience cheers. Youthful Corie Melaugh performed superb renditions of Imogene Giles' "Red Peppers" and Gwendolyn Stevenson's "Smash Up Rag." Following sets by Susan Cordell and Virginia Tichenor, the concert finale featured the entire cast, three at each of two pianos, with Adaline Shepherd's "Pickles and Peppers." Having once been William Jennings Bryan's presidential campaign theme, the tune seemed to

motivate several attendees to resume the campaign by marching around the theater and into the audience wearing straw hats and carrying placards.

Wednesday evening the ragtime dinner drew a throng of hungry ragtimers to the Smith-Cotton High School cafeteria for a repast accompanied by various performers. Afterward a goodly crowd strolled to the high school auditorium for “The Entertainer” concert. Host Jeff Barnhart and his wife Anne, piano and flute, led off with Scott’s “Kansas City Rag” taken at a good clip, Jeff accelerating at the end and Anne amazingly maintaining the pace. Their “Echoes from the Snowball Club” was truly an emotional experience. Stride was well represented by Brian Holland playing Waller’s “Viper’s Drag,” the trio of Barnharts and Holland with Waller’s “Stealin’ Apples,” and Jeff and Brian with Mike Schwimmer on washboard with “Copenhagen.” Anne joined the three for “Agitation Rag.” Jeff soloed on a memorable reading of Bix Beiderbecke’s modernistic “In the Dark.” Bob Milne contributed his composition “Mimi,” some boogie-woogie, and a lengthy “saloon piano” medley that ended fast and furiously. The concert concluded with the Boehm Ragtime Jazz Trio from Hungary (cornet, trombone, piano, violin and drums in various combinations) interpreting a varied program of ragtime and early pop including “Pineapple Rag,” “Someday Sweetheart,” “Cataract Rag,” “Whistling Rufus,” and “Lady Be Good.” Leader and violinist Tamas Ittzes demonstrated his curious Stroh violin, a metal horn and resonator replacing the usual sound box, on several selections.

#### **Thursday: Venues Open, Symposia Begin, and Concerts Continue**

Thursday morning four venues about town opened with continuous free ragtime. As he has for many years, witty host Bill Long ran the show at the big tent in the middle of Fifth Street known as the John Stark Pavilion. Genial Larry Lyles emceed activities for the second year at the Maple Leaf Club site. The Gazebo was resurrected as a performing venue this year hosted by Tabitha Burton with some of the time happily set aside for open piano signups. The Katy Depot, an elegantly restored train station, was the site of more performances and the ragtime tea. Dancers congregated at the Cake Walk Hall where Rod Biensen and Tricia Thoen handled the instructional duties.

Promptly at 9:00 a.m. the symposia began in the comfortable First United Methodist Church. Opening was “Perfessor” Bill Edwards explaining how honky-tonk music was the genre that saved ragtime. While formal ragtime was essentially forgotten during the 1930s and early 1940s, in the mid-1940s some pianists such as Paul Lingle, Bert Bailes, and Marvin Ash began to perform rags in a Dixieland style. Then Capitol Records’ “accidental” recording of Pee Wee Hunt’s orchestral version of “Twelfth Street Rag” during the 1948 musicians’ strike became a huge hit. Capitol experimented further with an album of “Honky-Tonk Piano,” performed by Lou Busch as Joe “Fingers” Carr, from which his composition “Ivory Rag” hit. This inspired a string of honky-tonk piano recordings, including some ragtime, by Del Wood, Knuckles O’Toole (usually a pseudonym for Dick Hyman), and others.

Glenn Jenks asked, “Why play ragtime?” His answer: It’s something you stumble into, but there are many rewards. He covered some basics, discussing some of his methods for teaching kids and demonstrating the difference between swing and syncopation. “Kicks on in-between beats—that’s what syncopation is.” He cited mastering the “boom chick” base as the major hurdle for beginning ragtime pianists of any age. Following Jenks, former child piano prodigy Dalton Ridenhour discussed Apple’s software for converting LPs to CD and loading them to iTunes.

David Reffkin, violinist and host on San Francisco’s KUSF of “The Ragtime Machine” which would celebrate its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary on July 4, reviewed memorable moments from past festivals that he had caught on tape—an interview with Larry Melton, 1970s grad student looking for a local project, who had found vestiges of Sedalia’s ragtime years and originated the festival; a prescient quote from David Jasen, “Everyone is entitled to my opinion;” Scott Kirby remarking on the streets of New Orleans in 1991, “Music is all I want to do;” and the late Jan Douglas’s remembrances of sensing the ghost of Joplin. He concluded

with a series of excerpts from various performances of Joplin's "Great Crush Collision March," each one demonstrating a different imaginative approach to the train crash. Suddenly Bill Long and Sue Keller entered and announced to a surprised David that he was the recipient of this year's Scott Joplin award for achievement in the field of ragtime. It was noted that Reffkin had helped Melton with the creation of the festival in 1974, had attended every edition of the festival since then, and had organized and directed the festival's All-Star Orchestra for ten years.

Ragtime Missouri style was the theme as the concert agenda continued at 2:00 p.m. in Liberty Center with "Cradle of Ragtime." Host John Petley introduced the parade of performers including himself; a Terry Parrish group with Terry, piano, Mike Schwimmer, compact washboard, Bob Ault, banjo, and Bill Edwards, bass; Marty Mincer and Bill Edwards duetting on two pianos; Virginia Tichenor, specialist in folk ragtime; The Skirtlifters, a string quartette whose fiddler had broken a finger and was obviously missed; and Australian stride pianist John Gill. Some memorable performances were Parrish's "Bees and Honey" from a Les Copeland piano roll; Ault and Parrish, two pianos, essaying "Joe Lamb's Old Rag;" the Skirtlifters' Kent Beyette "flatfoot" dancing in leather shoes to "Darkies' Pastime;" and John Gill with his spectacular amalgamation of "Maple Leaf Rag" and Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsody," one played in the base and the other in the treble and then the reverse, to cap the concert to standing applause.

Hungry ragtimers again gathered at the cafeteria for a barbecue beef dinner accompanied by syncopated strains followed at 8:00 p.m. by the "Easy Winners" concert in the auditorium. Host Donald Ryan, in my opinion probably the premier performer of ragtime in the formal classical style active on the festival circuit today, demonstrated how one can play a piece as written with few embellishments and yet make it uniquely his own stylistically. He played Joplin's "Easy Winners" and "Solace" and French's "Belle of Louisville" among others. John Petley then took the stage with his folksier stylings including pieces by Brun Campbell, Tom Shea, David Thomas Roberts, and Max Morath. Introduced as a "bloody good bloke," John Gill finished the first half with a fine selection of pieces from Eubie Blake, Fats Waller, Joseph Lamb, and James P. Johnson. The demand for an encore elicited a repeat of his "Joplin meets Liszt" spectacular. The second half began with a varied set by Ireland's Colm O'Brien and ended with a program by the Royal City Saxophone Quartet from Guelph, Ontario. The group entered from the rear strolling down the aisles playing, and stood directly in front of the audience before mounting the stage. It had modeled itself after the Six Brown Brothers, stars of the vaudeville stage, and played much of their repertoire. Turpin's "Ragtime Nightmare," Blake's "Charleston Rag," and Cobb's "Russian Rag" also received exemplary treatment. The entire cast joined in the concert capper, Joplin's "Pineapple Rag."

### **Friday: Symposia, Concert, Fashion Contest, Parade, and Dance**

Friday morning the symposia resumed with Rich Berry, whose camera lens has caught many a ragtimer off (and on) guard over the years since 1985. Hoyle Osborne, pianist at a hotel saloon in Durango, CO discussed some of his techniques for composing, and demonstrated with "Manatee Glide" from his suite for endangered species. While staying within the ragtime tradition, he tries to incorporate unique features that surprise the ear. Unwitting plagiarism is always a concern. Osborne then introduced violinist Tamas Ittzes, who explained the importance of the properties of similarity and contrast in composing, and Bill Edwards, who discussed his use of thematic material.

Sue Attala, researcher extraordinaire and English professor, narrated the convoluted history of "They Gotta Quit Kickin' My Dog Around," a hit song for Stark Music published in 1912. While the sheet music attributed the music to Cy Perkins and the lyrics to Webb M. Oungst, Witmark, who had contracted to purchase it, discovered that it had been based on an earlier folk song and contested the contract; however, the court ruled in favor of Stark. Carrie Stark, John's daughter-in-law, later claimed to have composed both words and music but acknowledged that she had borrowed the chorus.

Jeff Barnhart moderated the first master class session with eight participants ranging in age from child to adult. While the excellent performances left Jeff with little for serious critiquing, he offered a number of suggestions such as varying the repeats by using different dynamic levels and different pedaling. Teen Bryan Hawkins performed a delightful “Panama” in its original tango format, not often heard today.

In the afternoon the throng headed back to Liberty Center for the “Legacy of Scott Joplin” concert hosted by Glenn Jenks. Jenks led off with theme march “Antoinette,” and interspersed other Joplin pieces between sets by other performers. Paul Asaro followed with several Joplin rags, one in duet with Jenks (“Pineapple Rag”). Giovanni DeChiaro, guitarist extraordinaire, performed several Joplin rags, among them an impassioned “Heliotrope Bouquet,” and then introduced a Spanish touch with a military piece featuring drum effects on dampened strings. He encored with “Peacherine.” After performing “Magnetic Rag” at a torrid tempo, Alex Sandor settled down for more classic renditions of “Solace” and “Weeping Willow.” Noting the alleged importance of jazz in the development of ragtime, the New Creole Jazz Band from Springfield, MO followed with a set including Dixie versions of “Twelfth Street Rag” and “Frog-I-More Rag.” The entire cast joined for a climactic “Maple Leaf Rag.”

The center of activity then shifted to the Maple Leaf Club site where the vintage fashion contestants were assembling for judging and parade participants were organizing. Twenty-two entrants competed in five categories—young girls, young men, ladies, gentlemen, and couples. I then strolled up Ohio Ave. to the county courthouse to await the arrival of the parade. Spectators lining the street soon heard the strains of “Pineapple Rag” and espied an approaching color guard displaying flags of the United States and Missouri followed closely by four saxophonists. Next a series of elegantly restored vintage vehicles carrying board members and local and state political notables led the varied group of participants on the five-block march. With everyone gathered at the Stark Pavilion, Don Barnes, foundation vice-president, announced that the intent was for contestants to have to dress up only once for both parade and dance. Winners were: girls, Caitlin Kelsey; boys, Maurice Martin (4 years old); ladies, Joan Stiles; gentlemen, Bob Kelsey (whose comment, “My wife and daughter made me do this,” elicited a bit of laughter); and couples, Carol Miller and granddaughter (in vintage buggy).

Friday evening the superlative strains of the eight piece TurpinTyme Ragsters greeted dancers and listeners at the festively decorated high school cafeteria. The featured cakewalk contest drew eight couples, whom the judges winnowed down to three to receive the traditional cakes: first, Bill McVea and Sylvia Hopkins, Sedalia; second, Rich Berry and Joan Stiles, Toronto Ontario; and third, youngsters Wesley and Laurabeth Reznicek, Dixon, MO. Terry Parrish and trio entertained between sets.

### **Saturday: Symposia, Revelations, and Buffoonery**

Saturday morning the symposia resumed with Jack Rummel’s illustrated tribute to the late Dave Dallwitz, Australian artist, composer and arranger whose Euphonic Sounds Ragtime Ensemble straddled the boundary between jazz and ragtime. His twin reed arrangements defined his unique sound.

Explaining that his title “The Working Musician” was merely a placeholder, Bob Milne launched into an illustrated lecture that he had developed on his laptop at truck stops on the way to Sedalia. He introduced his subject by asking several questions—“Where did the rhythms of ragtime come from?” and “Where are the African rhythms that I’ve been told were a basis of ragtime?” The following summarizes some of his responses. Slaveholders would train their slaves to play in the style of Scotch-Irish reels and jigs with which they were familiar, many of which were syncopated. An example was “Zip Coon” (“Turkey in the Straw”) incorporating pre-1820 ragtime rhythms in the second half. Thus people danced to “jig music” for many years before it became known as “ragtime.” Because the slaves used the African “talking drum” to intimidate slaveholders, all drums were eventually banned. The slaves then substituted “patting juba” (hand slapping) to accompany their music.

Terry Parrish surveyed the historical Indianapolis ragtime scene. May Aufderhyde, whose wealthy father J.H. Aufderhyde started a firm to publish her rags, was the best known of the local composers. Others of importance were J. Russell Robinson, Paul Pratt, and Abe Olman.

A second master class featured skilled instructor Glenn Jenks, who set participants at ease with assurances that no one is competing and a recognition that everyone is at a different skill level. Again, participants covered a range of ages through adult. Jenks offered many points of advice useful to ragtimers in the audience as well as to the performers.

In the afternoon, concertgoers assembled at Liberty Center for the popular “Ragtime Revelations” concert hosted by Colm O’Brien and featuring contemporary compositions and young performers. This year five newly composed pieces were played. “Reminiscence Rag,” by pianist Eugene Dolan, demonstrated how a skillful composer can transform a seven-note phrase using only G, F sharp, and F into an entrancing theme. A two-piano rendition featured Colm playing the lead and Sue adding the improvisations. Sue soloed on a second newborn—Dale Hadley’s romantic “Sweet Pea Serenade,” with music box effects. Glenn Jenks premiered his newest, “Spider in the Tub,” a clever programmatic novelty. Hoyle Osborne premiered two with assistance from violinist Tamas Itzes—“Hesperus,” in waltz time, and “Nanook,” from his suite of tunes for North American endangered species. Other original compositions from past years were played by O’Brien (“Marilyn”), Osborne (“Enchantment”), and Jenks (the sprightly “Wrong Rag” and the fervent “Sosua”). Eighteen year-old Corie Malough from Tulsa played three pieces with professional aplomb—“April Fool Rag” (Schwartz), “Agitation Rag” (Hampton), and “Carolina Shout” (James P. Johnson). College student Adam Yarian roused the audience with “Wolverine Blues” (Morton), “Kitchen Tom” (Blake), and “Handful of Keys” (Waller). The concert closed with the entire cast, three on each piano and Osborne on banjo-uke, playing “The Entertainer.”

Early Saturday evening the elegantly restored Katy Depot provided the perfect ambiance for the annual party honoring donors to the Scott Joplin Foundation, accompanied by continuous ragtime. Wandering waiters served an assortment of savory hors d’oeuvres that we stabbed with toothpicks and placed on tiny plates to consume. Our goal was to garner enough to constitute a meal, and seemingly we were all successful.

Although this year the festival finale, the “late night, red light Ragtime Music Hall,” was moved to the more reasonable 8:00 hour at the high school auditorium, the tomfoolery was as much in evidence as ever. Host Dave Majchrzak, brandishing a whip and accompanied by his surrogate elephant King Tusk, set the stage by announcing, “Everybody knows I’m a veterinarian; therefore, that qualifies me as zookeeper for the evening.” Seated at the piano, he rattled off the difficult “Cataract Rag” by Hampton. After Mimi Blais, Brian Holland, Majchrzak and Keller, and the trio of Holland, Barnhart, and Schwimmer appeared successively in various odd pieces of costumery to perform (and sometimes to be dismissed), Majchrzak entered gazing quizzically at a flute and asked Jeff Barnhart how it worked and where it plugged in. Anne Barnhart appeared and dismissed Dave as Jeff assumed the piano bench. Taking the flute, she bent over the piano under the raised lid and played “Summertime,” the piano strings resonating audibly with the flute. Jeff then launched into Morton’s “Finger Buster.” After further buffoonery interspersed with Lamb’s “Top Liner” played by John Petley, Dave introduced the New Red Onion Jazz Babies, a six-piece Dixieland group plus Jeff on piano, who played “Limehouse Blues,” Lamb’s “Rapid Transit,” and “Clarinet Marmalade,” leading into the intermission. Starting the second half, Dave appeared wearing swim fins, goggles, and life vest, and played (and sang) a set of songs about water from vaudeville including the naughty “I Love to Go Swimmin’ with Women.” Suddenly announcing that King Tusk was missing, Dave searched the vicinity but he soon appeared with a blast from the bell of Steve Standiford’s tuba. Mimi Blais paid tribute to Lil Hardin Armstrong, Brian and Jeff duetted on two rousers (“Kansas City Stomps” and “Bohemia”), Anne and Jeff took the audience on an outing in a flivver with the loud and chuggy “Gasoline Rag” (1911), Jeff followed with “In My Solitude,” John Petley and Mike Schwimmer rode the “Brun Campbell Express,” and Sue

Keller displayed her considerable vocal talents with the sultry “Someone to Watch Over Me,” Jeff on piano. A final New Red Onion Jazz Babies’ set concluded with the stirring “King Chanticleer.” The entire cast then capped the concert with a rousing version of “Antoinette” to a standing ovation.

Although Sunday morning’s brunch at the Best Western seemed lightly attended this year, it remained the ideal opportunity for us to exchange farewells until we gather again in 2007.

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