

Festival Flashback ~ By Bill Edwards

In The Beginning

Those who have heard me at concerts know that I often state that Ragtime was America's first Rock and Roll. I have heard many other performers use this same analogy. In truth it was the music of youth, not immediately accepted by the older generation, and was the top selling genre for about 20 years. It met popularity and resistance all at once. This comparison would not be lost on those who know of the history of the annual festival we now enjoy in Sedalia, as there was a time when its very future seemed in serious doubt. The year it started, in fact.

Note that 2008 marked the 28th anniversary of the event, but only the 26th consecutive year. So how and when did it start? The rise of the popularity of Scott Joplin should be evident to those who listen to or play ragtime. In 1970, 1972 and 1974, Nonesuch Records released three volumes of Scott Joplin's piano rags played by Joshua Rifkin, the first one in conjunction with *The Collected Works of Scott Joplin* published by the New York Public Library. This had some impact in the classical music world, as many for the first time heard Joplin presented by Rifkin as played on a grand piano without accompaniment, and in well controlled, sometimes sedate tempos. Even though some previous recordings had done the same, the presentation of this series of records seemed geared towards classical music fans. It was, in essence, the first really scholarly treatise of the composer's work.

As the popularity of Rifkin's recordings started to spread, historian and musician Gunther Schuller set out to record concert band arrangements of ragtime, using selections from a period publication titled *Standard High Class Rags*, plus some additional rag arrangements in that style. *The Red Back Book* (the more descriptive title of the collection) was also well received. In 1973, director George Roy Hill encountered both of these recordings, and also heard his nephew playing a couple of Joplin rags. Being a pianist himself, he procured the collection and after playing through a few decided he wanted to use this music for the soundtrack of his latest film, *The Sting*. Schuller was not available to score the film, but allowed some of his arrangements to be adapted to it, and Marvin Hamlisch took over from there. The film was, of course, a phenomenal success, *The Entertainer* suddenly a top 40 radio hit, and Joplin's name was everywhere. There was a sudden demand for recordings in 1974, and many artists rushed to get something into the stores, as they had 20 years earlier during the honky-tonk piano craze.

There was also some demand and desire for live performances of this difficult music as well, and a number of artists who had been playing it for many years wanted a place where they could present it to an audience that came specifically to hear it. What better place than what would become known as the "Cradle of Ragtime," Sedalia, Missouri. A group of citizens who saw a great opportunity here got together, including leaders Bill Hopkins and Chamber of Commerce President Larry Hopkins, and proposed a festival for 1974 to promote the three Rs of Sedalia, Rail, Rawhide and Ragtime. Note that the town was also the northern terminus of the Texas cattle drives of the 19th century, and an important hub of the Missouri-Kansas-Texas (Katy) Railroad. So a festival was announced for the end of July, and invitations sent to all of the known ragtime performers of that time. Some of the citizens of the town were enthusiastic, but some at that time really didn't understand what they had in front of them with this golden opportunity. So in July, Sedalia became the focus of a major music event. But it was not the one that was originally planned.

Ragtime vs. Rock and Roll

As the 1974 debut of a ragtime festival was taking shape in Sedalia, so was another music event, one of historic proportions. Given the central proximity of Sedalia in the United States, and the large fairgrounds used for the annual State Fair, it seemed a natural for a stellar event. Musical Productions Incorporated assured the Missouri Department of Agriculture who had control over the fairgrounds that the three day event they were proposing would consist mostly of bluegrass and pop rock, and that no more than 50,000 tickets would be sold. They got permission to use the fairgrounds, and everything went downhill from there. For starters, the supposed bluegrass groups turned out to be Marshall Tucker Band and The Eagles, and the pop-rock groups included Jefferson Starship, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Bachman Turner Overdrive, and America among others. The event was promoted, at least outside of Missouri, as a "no hassles guaranteed" weekend, meaning that there would be no issues about drug use or distribution. What actually came to Sedalia in the guise of the Ozark Music Festival was the second largest of its kind ever, eclipsed only by Woodstock five years earlier. Even though this was not made into a major film (NBC filmed it but the courts confiscated the footage), there were many similarities between the two events.

The host for the event was Wolfman Jack, renegade pioneer rock DJ. Some of the acts booked, such as Bruce Springsteen, did not show up. However many others not booked, such as Joe Walsh and Aerosmith, did show up, creating more havoc with their improvised performance setups. Without going into too much detail about the event itself, as there are many sources that can be found on it, it should be known that from the times the crowds started showing up on Thursday, July 18, clogging all roads into town, until they wandered off the following Monday, a sense of dread was felt by many in Sedalia. The citizens found they weren't getting what was originally promoted to them. Instead, they had the National Guard called in to help keep the peace, long lines at virtually every store, kids stranded without money and sleeping in the fields, and all manner of mayhem that was quite foreign to a town like Sedalia. Drugs were sold and used openly. Nudity was rampant given the heat, as were medical emergencies. The cleanup of the fairgrounds alone, which suffered from a proper lack of restroom facilities, was a daunting task. Several had their lawns destroyed, and many incidents of crime were also reported.

From interviews I did with residents who were around for this debacle, I found the general consensus was that there was a feeling of uneasiness about having another music event in town, particularly within a week of the one had just ended. While ragtime in 1974 was hardly on the same par as rock and roll, the fact that the Ozark Music Festival had been so deliberately misrepresented actually caused a level of apprehension and doubt that went up to the municipal level. Some actually wondered what type of "ragtime" would actually make its way to town. So the organizers and participants faced a daunting task of winning over the people of Sedalia with music that was rightfully theirs. I was also told many times that quite frankly many Sedalia residents in the mid 1970s had little or no idea of the importance that the town held in music history, much less the potential future they had through promoting it. It is unclear whether there was any possibility of the ragtime festival being cancelled at that late date, but for some, that sentiment was clear. It was up to the participants and the guests alike to sway that opinion.

Year One of the Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival

In spite of the reservations, and to some extent a full grasp on how to coordinate some of the events, the first Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival got underway the same week Sedalia was cleaning up from its worst non-natural disaster ever. David Reffkin, who wandered into town early, became performer, liaison and volunteer all at once. He admits that at that time he looked

more like a rocker than a ragger, and that may have caused some apprehension, but that by the end of weekend all was well for him. Dave had already been involved with many facets of ragtime in college and had played in ragtime orchestra concerts as well as worked as a sound engineer, so he was a very useful resource to the organizers, and has been in attendance ever since. Bob Darch had also come advance of the event, doing necessary PR and lobbying to keep things on track.

Among the initial slate of performers were Bob Darch, Bill Bolcom, William Albright, Dick Wellstood, Max Morath, Trebor Tichenor, Dick Zimmerman (acting music director), Terry Waldo, and, of course, Eubie Blake. The original venue was just outside of downtown, held at the Liberty Park on West Third Street, utilizing both the outdoor areas and the auditorium near the ball field. Other than what has been described as less than enthusiastic local support, the biggest challenge was the late July heat and humidity in central Missouri. Some outdoor events needed to be moved indoors just to accommodate the musicians and older concert goers. The pianos were of questionable quality, but serviceable. The flying insects were in ample supply, and made outdoor performances difficult at best. Attendance was spotty but sufficient, and according to many reports more people from out of town attended than did Sedalia residents.

In the end, there was no crime associated with the event, no nude musicians, no drugs worse than aspirin, no muddy fields of sewage left behind, no riots, and no national headlines. With all the minor SNAFUs that showed up during the weekend, the general consensus among organizers and participants was, "Let's do this again next year."

There were a few struggles with getting approval for a 1975 event, but the growing presence of ragtime in the popular media through new recordings and television specials, as well as more recognition of both Scott Joplin and Sedalia, were convincing enough that the town should take advantage of the surge and use the event to promote themselves with a positive spin. It was held again at the end of July with pretty much the same roster of performers, but was better attended, particularly by newly minted ragtime enthusiasts and players who performed at the scattered afterglows. The only real issue was the late July weather, which was predictably hot with occasional thunderbusters. The reviews were even better, particularly among residents who ventured forth to learn more about their musical heritage.

Then it just died.

By 1976 disco was in and ragtime was once again passé. There was diminished interest in trying to subsidize a third festival, knowing it was not likely to generate as much revenue as it required in order to facilitate the weekend. Many of the issues of the previous two years came up during discussions, and the Chamber of Commerce and the organizers simply did not plan another event. In other words, it was canceled with little or no explanation.

Sedalia was once again relegated to the sleepy seat of Pettis County except during the yearly State Fair.

Who saved it from extinction? In part, the United States Postal Service. In 1983 they announced a commemorative stamp featuring Scott Joplin. What better place to unveil said stamp but the place where he first found ragtime fame, Sedalia, Missouri. With little advance warning, some of the organizers of the event that had laid dormant for seven years decided they would try a revival of the Scott Joplin Festival in conjunction with the release of the stamp, therefore giving national media attention to the town, if only for one or two days. It did not take much convincing this time for either citizens of Sedalia or the many performers who offered their services to the event. One important change was a shift backwards to an early June timeslot

when the weather was more amenable to the outdoor venues, but still could take advantage of early summer tourism.

This was the start of the annual festival we attend today. Now retitled the Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival, in part because there have been performers from many other countries in regular attendance, and in part to create a draw for tourism from those countries, it did not always thrive in those first few years. Due to the diligence of the hard core fans and die hard players, the event continued even through questionable economic times because of the passion they felt for the music. Better organization and publicity in the late 1980s helped put the festival on the map and increased visibility for Sedalia, now nicknamed "The Cradle of Ragtime."

I talked with the musical director from 1987 to 1989, Sylvia Thompson, and she noted some of the early struggles and necessary changes. Early mailing lists were on paper, of course, which made notification more of a chore than in these days of automatic databases. They extended the original Saturday to Sunday event first to a Friday start, then to Thursday. With the help of Joplin biographer Ed Berlin, the newly formed Scott Joplin International Ragtime Foundation received academic accreditation for the symposiums, adding educational credibility and increasing opportunities for alternate financing. New pins were designed for each years event to identify it and generate revenue. The Ragtime Dance was added in 1987 to great acclaim. The concerts were individually identified by names, and afternoon concerts added during her tenure.

Both Sylvia and another long time member, Anna Lee Baile, plus other board members I talked to echoed the concerns and subsequent evolution of the town over time. Some concurred that Sedalia was less sophisticated musically in the 1970s, and that by the time the 1990s rolled around a new generation was enlightened to the importance of their role in the birth of indigenous American music. Sylvia said that the reaction she got from the residents was "shocking, but heart warming," as many of them had no idea about their musical heritage until the event was regularly held, and that they very much enjoyed the learning process. Thus the painful memories of the Ozark Music Festival were replaced by the pleasant ones of the ongoing celebration of the town of Rails, Rawhide and Ragtime.