

2005 Festival a Success!! by *Jack Rummel*

It was already hot when the parade participants began assembling in front of the Liberty Center on a cloudless Thursday morning. Bustled and corseted, many of the ladies had already posed for the judges in the vintage attire contest, as had a few men in their starched collars and heavy coats, and now the parade was about to begin. With Scott Joplin Foundation President Jo Ann Neher leading off in a horse-drawn surrey and several Missouri state senators and representatives close behind in a stunning 1925 Pierce Arrow vintage auto, the parade was elegant indeed.

Adding to the ambiance were several Model A Fords from the Heart of America Car Club in Kansas City, a notable contingent of ladies from the local Red Hat Society and a jazz band riding on an old flatbed truck. By the time everyone arrived at the Maple Leaf Club Site, all were in high spirits. Judge Donald Barnes kept things moving through the necessary introductions and recognitions, Scott Kirby opened with *Leola*, this year's Joplin "theme rag," and the music was officially underway.

The morning concert at the Liberty Center was a very moving tribute to composer Joseph Lamb and his daughter, Patricia Lamb Conn, was even invited to the stage to share some reminiscences. Emcee John Petley announced that much of the music for this concert had come from a newly-published folio of rare Lamb manuscripts. Performers included Mimi Blais, Petley, John Remmers, Sophie Rivard and Virginia Tichenor, and we were even treated to two Lamb songs, *I Want To Be A Birdman* and *Follow The Crowd To Coney*, ably rendered by the singing talents of Sue Keller and Jim Radloff. The concert closed with *Champagne Rag* while glasses of real champagne were being offered to patrons in the front row – a nice touch.

The afternoon "Cradle of Ragtime Concert" was emceed by Brian Holland, who noted that it was named in appreciation of those pioneers who gave this music life. As we reveled in this program of quality ragtime, Holland wryly observed that, by contrast, "I don't think in 50 years we will have a Britney Spears Appreciation Society!" Featured were rags played by Holland (clean and sparkling), Alex Sandor (rendered passionately), Susan Cordell (punctuated liberally with arm flourishes), Marty Mincer (speedy, very speedy and speedier yet) and Trebor Tichenor (folksy and almost sedate by comparison). The seemingly endless supply of fine rags emanating from those early years in Missouri is impressive indeed. Sadly, both of these wonderful concerts played to a house that was only about 40% full.

Thursday evening is traditionally devoted to The Ragtime Dance and again this year the music was supplied by the Sunflower Ragtime Orchestra from Kansas City. Dance masters Richard Duree and Ruth Levin were on hand, but seemed to take a discreet secondary role to the dancers themselves who showed us their terpsichorean talents to the orchestra's many different styles (the cavernous Mathewson Center presents an acoustical challenge to any musical group!). The cakewalk contest was won this year by youngsters Brett Youens and Lisa Sitterle, while Rich Berry and Joanne Himes tied for second place with Jason Bedore and Michelle Schubert.

By Friday morning some clouds had rolled in to bring cooler temperatures as the symposia opened at the First United Methodist Church. Paul Stewart led off, and after a thumbnail sketch of the vibrant years of the early 20th Century and the adverse reaction to ragtime's emergence he discussed banjos as a link from plantation music to ragtime's

rhythms, bands as a source of its full sound and bars as a venue. He even offered a novel (if somewhat crass) theory as to the origin of the word “ragtime” which will surely fuel future debate.

Squeek Steele then presented a discourse on the piano accompaniment of silent films and, following many desperate moments when a trio of “volunteer engineers” from the audience tried feverishly to get “the only 16mm movie projector in Pettis County” to work, we were ultimately treated to two films: a Laurel & Hardy short and a John Barrymore feature, “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,” complete with live piano music by Steele and some pointers on creating the appropriate moods.

Closing the morning was Trebor Tichenor who summarized much information from a new book, “Brass Bands at the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair” by Richard Schwartz. The meticulous research that led to this book has established conclusively that ragtime was played at the Fair, not just on the fringes (“The Pike” as it was called) but at formal concert venues on the Fair’s grounds. Composers such as Kerry Mills, J. Bodewald Lampe, Fred Stone, Scott Joplin, Tom Turpin, W.C. Polla, Clarence Wiley, Harry Kelly and Abe Holzmann were among those featured and Tichenor played recordings of the rags and projected colorful images from his sheet music collection to flesh out the presentation.

The afternoon concert, “The Legacy of Scott Joplin,” was hosted by Jeff Barnhart and played to an almost full house. It proved to be an effective balance between faithful renditions and jazzy improvisations, illustrating once again what a wonderful repository of fresh musical ideas Joplin’s mind has proved to be. Musicians included Barnhart, John DeChiaro, Brian Holland, Scott Kirby, John Petley and Donald Ryan and each seemed capable of sensitive lyricism as well as creative interpretation. Guitarist DeChiaro’s idea to include champion whistler Mary Frances Herndon on a duet of *Bethena* was well received, for it transcended a possible perception of “hokiness” into real beauty.

The afternoon had been broken by a few thundershowers, punctuating the sky but not dampening our spirits. By the time the evening audience had come in out of the drizzle for the “Easy Winners Concert,” Mathewson Center had been transformed into Joplin Hall. Emcee Scott Kirby began the music with two Joplin compositions and as he completed the last notes of *Solace* you could almost hear the audience take a collective breath before bursting forth with applause. Sophie Rivard and Mimi Blais then played violin-piano duets on three French-Canadian pieces, plus William Bolcom’s lovely *Graceful Ghost* and a lively gypsy air.

Kirby returned to join Rivard on two lyrical Joplin duets and then he brought on the duo of Gilles Poirier and Gabriel Bourque, better known as “Two Pianos Alive.” After listening up to then to a series of sensitive performances of classic ragtime and concert pieces, the audience was ready for a bit of raucous flash and applauded the duo enthusiastically as the first half closed.

The multi-talented Paul Asaro re-opened the music with some Jelly Roll Morton, Charley Thompson, Fats Waller, a James P. Johnson ballad, a vocal and ended with *Caravan*, a seismic show-stopper. The balance of the program was ably filled by The TurpinTyme Ragsters, a band from Kansas City, which played a lengthy set of happy, toe-tapping music to send the audience off in a festive mood. And mercifully, the tractor-pullers and drag-racers that normally inhabit the nearby grandstand were silent all evening, allowing us to savor every note of the entire program.

Rod Biensen kicked off the Saturday symposia with a remembrance of Wally Rose. He emphasized the important role Rose played in the revival of early jazz and ragtime that centered around San Francisco in the 1940s. The program emphasized Rose's status as a band pianist, but also featured later band recordings that included pianist Pete Clute, one of Rose's primary students.

What was expected by many to be a dry history lecture proved to be a fascinating presentation by Gary Kramer, executive director of the Missouri State Historical Society, as he painted a picture of Scott Joplin's Sedalia that actually offered Joplin optimism in the midst of the racist attitudes and practices of the day. Kramer theorized that Joplin found a strong Black community in Sedalia that nurtured him and allowed him to respond to overt oppression with creative energy.

Rounding out the morning was Scott Kirby, who brought us incisive "Perspectives on Scott Joplin" that greatly helped us to appreciate this complex musical genius. Kirby argued that Joplin's ragtime was *through composed* and thus intended to be played as written, unlike many other forms of ragtime which begged for improvisation. His *Maple Leaf Rag* defined a specific musical genre more than any other composition in all of musical history. Quiet, dignified and shunning public performance, Joplin was always pushing the limits of composition, never running out of ideas and continually using his music to present a variety of emotions besides glee.

"Ragtime Revelations," the featured afternoon concert, was hosted by Jack Rummel. Designed to feature young emerging artists and/or recent ragtime compositions, the cast of players included Mimi Blais, Sophie Rivard, Rummel, Virginia Tichenor, Trebor Tichenor, Adam Yarian and Brett Youens and the sounds of new ragtime filled the Liberty Center auditorium. Toward the end, emcee Rummel was interrupted with a surprise visit from Foundation Vice-President Kathleen Boswell and Board Member Bill Long, who presented Rummel with the 2005 Scott Joplin Award for Achievement in the Field of Ragtime. He was then invited to sit down while Blais and Rivard played a very moving rendition of his ragtime waltz, *When The Work Is Done, I'll Dance*. It was an emotional moment for all who witnessed it.

Saturday evening is always a challenge in logistics and timing, for not one but two concerts are packed into the evening, each at a different venue. Sue Keller emceed the earlier "Entertainer Concert" at Joplin Hall and promptly introduced Tim and Alex Sandor, a father and son team from the Lake Superior area. Each performed solo rags and then teamed up on thickly-textured duets which were welcomed by an enthusiastic audience. The Butch Thompson Trio followed, featuring Thompson on piano, Marty Eggers on bass and Hal Smith on drums. Ever the laid-back entertainer, Thompson along with his sidemen provided a flawlessly swinging set of rags and early piano jazz.

Tony Caramia then sat at the piano to play grandiose ragtime, dizzyingly complex novelty piano and a jazzy tribute to composer Harold Arlen that climaxed with Sue Keller singing Arlen's signature song, *Over the Rainbow*. Closing the first concert was one of the few family acts in ragtime, the Tichenor Family Five. With patriarch Trebor Tichenor on one piano, daughter Virginia Tichenor on another piano, son Andrew Tichenor on trumpet, daughter-in-law Susanna Tichenor on violin and viola and son-in-law Marty Eggers on tuba and upright bass, it was an exciting set indeed. Equally at home with early jazz as well as ragtime (their rendition of *Roberto Clemente* was simply

stunning), they brought out Butch Thompson (on clarinet) and Hal Smith (on drums) to end the concert with the jazz standard *Shake That Thing*.

Emcee Sue Keller had run a tight ship and there proved to be ample time to scoot across town to the Liberty Center for a prompt ten o'clock kickoff of the second concert, the "Late Night Red Light Music Hall." No single emcee seemed to emerge, but the music flowed smoothly between performers. Three pianos decorated the stage and all were used, as players scampered from one to the next. An announced sub-set was "Animal Pieces," and the concert closed with *Tiger Rag* featuring tiger costumes worn by Dave Majchrzak and Mimi Blais. Other performers were Jeff Barnhart, Brian Holland, Sue Keller, Dick Kroeckel, the Rhythm Section behind Majchrzak's piano (Bob Grimm on banjo and Joe Schulte on tuba) and Two Pianos Alive (Gilles Poiroir and Gabriel Bourque). The themes of the show seemed to be How Fast Can We Play and How Silly Can We Be. It was a zany release of creative energy to end the Festival and it just might have been vaudeville at its best.

It would be a glaring omission not to mention the many peripheral events surrounding the Festival's concerts. There were two main sites of continuous (and free) daytime music: the Maple Leaf Club Site, presided over by Board Member Larry Lyles, and the Stark Pavilion tent, under the direction of Board Member Bill Long. This reporter's schedule did not permit him to visit the Maple Leaf Club Site (good reports were heard, however) but Long certainly kept the Stark Tent crowd happy with his able shepherding of performers and his snappy repartee. He was rendered speechless, though, when pianist Brett Youens presented him with a printed copy of a rag he wrote and dedicated to Long.

(He was anything but speechless the next morning, however, when a backhoe and a jackhammer showed up nearby and threatened to destroy the ambiance as well as some concrete. Ever at the ready in case of emergencies, "superman" Long emerged from a phone booth with his red "S" tee-shirt and promptly diverted the demolition plans to another day.)

A stop each night at the "Sedville After-Hours Honky-Tonk" (aka State Fair Inn) invariably showed that the young lions were keeping the two keyboards smoking and the listeners loved it. And when Board Member Nancy Moss arrived with pizzas for the pianists, it was a sure sign that the fun would go on past the witching hour.

Other fringe events that were enjoyed by many included the "Cake Walk" Dance Hall, hosted by Richard Duree and Ruth Levin; the Katy Depot and the many musicians who performed there; "Leola's Finger-Lickin' Ragtime Barbecue," with good music and good eats at the State Fair Community College; musical "Master Classes," taught by pedagogue Tony Caramia and activities at many local churches offering home-cooked food and down-home ragtime.

The Sunday Ragtime Brunch always offers a chance to say farewell to friends among an elegant array of culinary delights. From the tone and tempo of the music, the pianos were definitely there to wake you up rather than to allow quiet conversation, but people could always retire to the corners to bid their *adieux*. Many thanks should go to Jo Ann Neher and her Board, but special mention should surely be made of the three people who arranged for the musicians and coordinated all of the events, namely Sue Keller, Bill Long and John Petley. Without their scheduling skills and musical acumen, this week would only be a mish-mash of music played by artists each jockeying for the spotlight.

Instead it was an *event*, and one that we will long remember in our hearts and minds. ~
Jack Rummel