SEDALIA’S
RAGTIME
HERITAGE

A publication of the
SEDALIA HERITAGE FOUNDATION
written by Larry C. Melton
In support of the
SEDALIA RAGTIME ARCHIVE
People have always made music. It comes from our souls and expresses who we are. When America gained its independence the people tried to disconnect from their European colonial cultures. They Americanized everything, that is, except their music.

For nearly one hundred years American’s kept their Old World immigrant musical traditions. However, a nation that inspired innovation and creativity in government, business, literature and science would ultimately weave from those Old World traditions a new, youthful and unique musical form as contagious as the liberty that nurtured it.

Religious music lifts and inspires the soul. Patriotic music infuses and motivates a people to national loyalty. But it is the popular music of a culture that defines a people and tells us who they are. The best of that music becomes Classical.

In the New World the popular music of the Europeans offered lyrical melodies and harmonies with traditional tempos. African slaves brought mournful wailing and pulsing rhythms that clashed with the chanting cadences of the Native Americans and the contagious ostinato of arrivals from the Southern Hemisphere.

Out of this musical potpourri, gifted composers reconfigured the Old World styles into something new and one man alchemized them all into musical gold and shared his genius with posterity.

His unique syncopations were designated “rags” and his musical formatting for them became the standard and then the antecedent of most of the modern musical forms this nation has evolved.

Created and developed in Sedalia, Missouri around 1900, Scott Joplin’s compositions gave Americans our own unique national style...Classic Ragtime became America’s music.
...AND SEDALIA’S RAGTIME LEGACY

Joplin probably followed Otis Saunders to Sedalia after they met and became friends at the Chicago Columbian Exposition in 1894. With two railroad shops and a booming economy, Sedalia offered the lure of work for a musician. There was also the added opportunity for an education and formal musical training at the George R. Smith College for Negroes. So it is likely that Joplin lived in Sedalia between 1895-1900, though as an itinerant musician with railroads available in every direction, he traveled considerably.

Joplin may have been in the area earlier since the Katy Railroad connected Sedalia with his hometown of Texarkana, Texas. But by 1895, he was playing cornet in the Queen City Cornet Band and had formed his own Texas Medley Quartet. This vocal group performed as far away as Syracuse, New York in 1895 and he had music published in New York City and Temple, Texas by 1896.

Sedalia then would have been a good base for Joplin as it had a large African-American population by the 1890’s, plenty of work for a talented musician and the music program at the Negro College. He soon became deftly able to apply what he was learning to his own compositions.
Scott Joplin’s earliest pieces were simple songs and piano studies, but by 1898 his work was beginning to show his applied education as well as his talent and enormous creativity.

When Scott Joplin came to Sedalia he likely lived with the Marshall family, and 12-year old Arthur Marshall was an early pupil along with another young Sedalian, Scott Hayden. As the older teacher’s reputation grew, others came to town for the expressed purpose of learning from Joplin and there was employment for them, too.

Black “Gentlemen’s Clubs” came and went in Sedalia, and Joplin performed in at least two of them. One such establishment, The Maple Leaf Club operated by W.J. Williams at 121 Main Street included several colorful members and it employed a number of performers including “Scott Joplin, The Entertainer”. He made The club famous and Sedalia as well.

Many locations in Sedalia are associated with Scott Joplin and his numerous acquaintances.
Joplin had signed over his earlier pieces to publishers who left him with little profit for his work. Nevertheless, Joplin avoided his earlier mistakes by hiring an attorney, Robert Higdon. He represented Joplin by negotiating for Joplin's next composition. They approached John Stillwell Stark, who had just purchased a local publishing firm, an negotiated a contract for the composition that launched Classic Ragtime in 1899, with the “The Maple Leaf Rag”. The contract the men negotiated provided for Joplin to receive a penny per copy and that alone afforded him a small income for life. For Stark it was the start of a lucrative publishing business he later moved to St. Louis and then New York.

Joplin’s Classic Rags came to carry the printed admonition to not play the pieces fast. He considered his compositions Classic Rags and sought to differentiate them from the rollicking jig rags of the dance halls. Joplin’s prominence and reputation spread quickly and he was soon referred to as the “King of Ragtime”
Ed Berlin in his definitive biography of Scott Joplin says Joplin’s sobriquet “The King of Ragtime” was most appropriate and supported by a vast body of evidence. It all began with “The Maple Leaf Rag” for it became American’s first musical top seller. The rag was archetypal and established the structure other ragtime composers would follow. This alone established Joplin as the ragtime king. And, as the old Maple Leaf Club card attests he was also “The Entertainer”.

Also in 1899, Joplin and Stark announced the anticipated publication of “The Ragtime Dance”. It was a folk piece written to be performed with a narrator and illustrating the type of dancing that was typical of “The Gentlemen’s Clubs”. The work was performed at the Wood’s Opera House in Sedalia in November 1899, by dancers from Sedalia’s Black 400 Club.

The following year “Swipesy Cakewalk” was published by Stark. Joplin, and his student and friend Arthur Marshall, composed the new rag. A photo of a young newsboy was on the original cover.

It is also possible that Joplin’s famous lost opera “The Guest of Honor” was at least partially written in Sedalia. Joplin toured performances during 1903, and gave five performances in Sedalia. However, the manuscript and scores were left in payment of a debt in a Kansas town and the property was never reclaimed. Some music from the opera probably was published over the years with different titles.

Joplin’s personal life in Sedalia is a bit shrouded, but in 1899 he had married Belle Hayden, Scott Hayden’s brother’s widow. Little is known about their life together, but Belle had little interest in her husband’s music and that is where he placed his attention.
The Joplins followed John Stark to St. Louis in about 1901, but the couple soon divorced after the death of an infant daughter in 1903. Over the next four years Joplin returned to Sedalia several times as when he was featured at the 1904 Liberty Park 4th of August celebration. Joplin had remarried in 1904, and he and his wife, the former Freddie Alexander, had come to Sedalia while on a performance tour.

While back in town for the August 4th concert Freddie contracted pneumonia and died in the autumn only three months after they had married. Joplin left Sedalia and never returned to the place where he first experienced success.

Sedalia also boasted another venerable music publishing house by the name of A.W. Perry & Son Music Publishers (1870-1967). In the fateful year of 1904 they published another of Joplin’s compositions “The Favorite.” *Perry’s Musical Magazine* published many ragtime pieces over the years including the work of Perry’s son Philip. The magazine was distributed nationwide by mail order.
Ragtime caught on quickly perhaps because it was so contrary to the Victorian era’s culture of propriety, reserve and respectability. At first it was bawdy, rambunctious, untamed, and sensuous.

But then it grew up, matured and because it was so unique, structured (in an unstructured sort of way), and appealing, it came to be called Classic for ragtime was indeed classical. While this music didn’t always originate in respectable locations, it was quickly recognized for its sophistication and stylishness and quickly spread to acceptable venues.

Admit it or not, nearly everyone was mesmerized by the syncopated compositions of the turn of the twentieth century, and the rags were played in proper Victorian parlors, on vaudeville stages, and in formal opera houses around the world. European classical composers such as Brahms, Debussy and Stravinsky were influenced by this captivating music, and their refined audiences were as excited about the music as their less elegant American cousins.

David Jasen, one of the best authorities on ragtime, defines this music as “brimful of exuberant energy, an extraordinarily gay, zesty music which is distinguished from all other kinds of music by its use of an extended melodic line of syncopations harmonized with a regularly metered bass.” Moreover, several identifiable styles within ragtime range from folk to novelty, classic to stride, and Tin Pan Alley to New Orleans. But it is Classic Ragtime Sedalia celebrates.

Here in the United States, ragtime went in many directions, but Scott Joplin was the recognized leader. After all, his “Maple Leaf Rag” set sales records and had there been a “Top Forty” countdown in those days, it would have swept the charts. Furthermore as Stark moved his publishing business across the country to New York he effectively marketed the composer’s music and it sold in all the available formats of the day.
Joplin’s productivity more than justifies his title “King of Ragtime”. He wrote 34 original ragtime pieces, a ballet “The Ragtime Dance,” a book of instrumental ragtime, “The Red Back Book,” and two operas “The Guest of Honor” and “Treemonisha” along with at least 22 other songs, waltzes, and piano pieces. He was a busy man.

His initial compositions were issued in all available 19th century formats: piano, vocal and instrumental sheet music, piano rolls and later on phonograph cylinders and gramophone discs as sound recordings. Since his death, Joplin’s rags have been used as silent film accompaniment, movie and TV soundtracks, and background tracks for radio and television ads. In 1972 “Treemonisha” premiered in Atlanta, went on to play Wolf Trap Farm, and then 64 performances on Broadway. In 1974 his music was used for two ballet productions, “Elite Syncapations” and “The Red Back Book.”

In his lifetime Joplin received the acclamation of his musical contemporaries, the adulation of his devoted admirers and significant media publicity attesting to his popularity and fame and his music lives on.

Joplin has received many accolades for his work, such as multiple Hollywood Oscars due to Martin Hamlisch’s "The Sting" score in 1973. Also, Joplin received a Pulitzer Prize for Music in 1976, was inducted in the Songwriters' Hall of Fame in 1977, and he is commemorated on a 1983-issued U.S. postage stamp.” A motion picture was made of his life in 1977.
During the first half of the 20th century the original ragtimers kept the music alive in Sedalia: Otis Saunders who brought Joplin to town after their meeting at the 1893 Columbian World’s Fair in Chicago, Arthur Marshall who later moved to Kansas City, Missouri but returned to visit family and to perform, and Tom Ireland who worked for the local paper and was part of many musical groups in town. In 1951, and under director Abe Rosenthal, the “Men’s Choral Club” dedicated a concert to Joplin and gave a plaque to the city as a memorial to his music.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s there were more memorial ragtime concerts by Bob Darch, Arthur Marshall and Tom Ireland and local instrumental bands. The Scott Joplin Memorial Foundation installed a large granite monument commemorating the Maple Leaf Club site and honoring Sedalia’s Classic Ragtime pioneers.

The city’s tradition of local concerts and programs culminated in the 1974 Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival. For four days nearly every major ragtime performer in the country including a Joplin contemporary, Eubie Blake, played on Sedalia stages. It was repeated in 1975, and after a brief pause, the Festival resumed in 1983 and has continued to be an annual event.

After a year and a half in planning the 1974 and ’75 Festivals brought together professional and amateur performers and composers, as well as scholars and musicologists, fans and enthusiasts from around the world.

A group of leading citizens comprised the Festival’s corporate Board under the auspices of the Sedalia Area Chamber of Commerce: Jake Siragusa was president and Larry Melton, Chamber Executive, was the Festival producer. Highlights included a series of seminars on Joplin, classical ragtime, and Sedalia’s history. Participants included Rudy Blesh, center (They All Played Ragtime) Dr. Addison Reed, Al Rose, Jazz historian, and many of the performers.

There was a Ragtime piano contest, and sheet music swap and sale, and free performance venues around town, including the parking lot at the Maple Leaf Club site where the Jaycees build a stage set “Maple Leaf Club” façade for a backdrop.

However after the two events were over and with all the memories gathered, two of the favorite activities became the impromptu and nightly "After-hours" Play-down at the Holiday Inn, as well as the Sunday afternoon concert in Liberty Park. Performers played on the island and the audience used the opposite bank for their folding chairs and blankets.

In 1983, after a year of hard work Larry Allen and the Scott Joplin Stamp Committee were successful in getting the U.S. Postal Service to hold the stamp’s First Day of Issue ceremony in Sedalia. At the same time, the Scott Joplin Festival Committee reorganized and restarted the event. It has been an annual affair since 1983.

Over the years nearly everyone involved in the field of ragtime has been at a Sedalia festival, and the list of directors and producers is extensive. Many of the original festival elements were incorporated in the revived events. Activities have been divided between the paid concerts, activities at the free venues downtown, and the symposia.

Direction of the revived festivals has varied from a single coordinator directing the entire event to years when assignments were distributed among the members of the Festival board. Initially Dick Zimmerman returned each year to act as performance director, and several individuals including Rudi Blesh, Al Rose, Dr. Addison Reed, Mike Montgomery, David Jason, and Dr. Ed Berlin led spirited symposia sessions. The ever popular “After Hours” gatherings at the performers’ motel, the Sunday “Farewell Brunch,” and the “Summer Breeze” in Liberty Park were also recurring events.
Many new innovations have been added as well, including a ragtime dance and dance contest. Period Costume shows and vintage automobiles in festival parades became popular and a permanent venue at the Maple Leaf Club site was constructed. The Foundation kept a permanent office in the Bothwell Hotel for many years. Recently it has been relocated to 507 S. Ohio.

The Festival Foundation began awarding the Scott Joplin Lifetime Achievement Award in 1989. The honor has been bestowed annually in recognition of outstanding contributions in the field of ragtime.

**SCOTT JOPLIN LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD RECIPIENTS**

- 1989 - Max Morath
- 1990 - Wally Rose
- 1991 - Dick Zimmerman
- 1992 - Trebor Tichenor
- 1993 - Dick Hyman
- 1994 - Bob Darch
- 1995 - David Jasen
- 1996 – Jean & Paul Huling
- 1997 – Terry Waldo
- 1998 – John Arpin
- 1999 – Jeanene Wright
- 2000 – Dr. Edward Berlin
- 2002 – St. Louis Ragtimers
- 2003 – Michael Schwimmer
- 2004 – Nora Hulse
- 2005 – Jack Rummel
- 2006 - David Reffkin
- 2007 – Founders of the Festival
  - Dorothy Kitchen
  - Kathryn Rayford
  - Jake Siragusa
  - Harlan Snow.
- 2008 – Richard Berry
- 2009 – Jim Radloff
- 2010 - Sue Keller
- 2011 – Helen and David “Smiley” Wallace
- 2012 - Patricia Lamb Conn
- 2013 - Johnny Maddox
- 2014- Tex Wyndham

A young musician came to the first festival in 1974; he helped with the set-up and logistics in return for an opportunity to be part of the event. David Reffkin has not missed a single festival since and has contributed enormously to the seminars and concerts. For ten years he served as director of the Festival’s All-Star Orchestra. David has been a part of Sedalia’s ragtime heritage for over 40 years.

The insatiable need for funding led to a variety of fund raising activities, and the Festival has been fortunate to receive sizeable grants from the major arts and humanities funding agencies at the state and Federal level. Even with all that effort, however, the generous support of numerous individuals and corporations, especially at the local level, have allowed the annual Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival to prosper up to the present and hopefully far into future.
After Rudi Blesh’s donation of Joplin’s own copy of the “Treemonisha” score to the Joplin Festival in 1974, the Festival producer and College officials decided to start a ragtime archive at the State Fair Community College. Numerous items of significant interest were contributed to this collection including Tom Ireland’s scrapbooks, clarinet and memorabilia, the only known card from the Maple Leaf Club designating Joplin “The Entertainer”, the beautiful stained glass window salvaged from the Woods Opera House, and the cornerstone from the George R. Smith College. Eventually, the original 1950’s, 1960’s, and 1970’s records of the Sedalia Concerts and Festivals were added.

Through the years gracious donors have given important items, such as 2000 pieces of sheet music, piano rolls, and Bob Darch's LP ragtime record collection. There are editions of major ragtime publications plus books, magazines, articles and clippings. Records from 1983 to the present including audio and video recordings from the festivals are also being gathered.

In January of 2015, the College transferred ownership of the Archive to the Sedalia Heritage Foundation, and the accumulated documents, relics and ephemera of this great tradition are being inventoried, conserved and stored. Soon the Foundation will begin creating displays and exhibits for use around the city and at the Katy Depot location.

The group is seeking public support not only for the preservation of these materials and their public display, but to gain access to additional items being sought for the collection. They are interested in acquiring ragtime periodicals (original or reproduction), ragtime sheet music, piano rolls, recordings, photographs, and books. In fact nearly anything with a ragtime connection will be welcomed and conserved in the collection, and be available for public use and display.
Larry Melton who produced and directed the 1974 and 1975 festivals in Sedalia gathered and organized this narrative. He taught history and government at East Central College in Union, Missouri. In 1976 he contributed much of the original Ragtime collection and is now serving as a special consultant for the Archive.

Deborah Biermann has been the Executive Director of the Sedalia Heritage Foundation since its inception in 1986 and is the retired Executive Director of the Sedalia Area Chamber of Commerce. She served a lead role in the restoration and reuse of the historic Sedalia Katy Depot. Deborah is the archivist and primary custodian for the Sedalia Ragtime Archives.

The Sedalia Conservator was an AfroAmerican newspaper published on the grounds of the George R. Smith College in Sedalia, Missouri from 1903-1909.
This publication is produced and distributed by the Sedalia Heritage Foundation for the purpose of supporting the preservation and interpretation of Sedalia’s Ragtime Heritage, and holds all rights of reproduction. Special recognition is extended to Mr. Ed Berlin for his meticulous research and definitive history of Joplin and ragtime music; and to Professor Bill Edwards for his magnificent collection of beautiful sheet music images on the World Wide Web.

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The Sedalia Heritage Foundation is a 501c3 not for profit dedicated to the operation of the Historic Katy Depot as Sedalia’s Welcome Center and to the interpretation of Sedalia’s rich heritage.