

RAGTIME & EARLY JAZZ PIANO
SELECTED COMPOSER BIOGRAPHIES

SCOTT JOPLIN (1868-1917)

Joplin was born in Texarkana, Texas. His musical talent was noticed early by his family, and although they were poor, his mother managed to buy a piano and he took lessons. By his teens, he was well known locally, playing at various church and school functions, club meetings, and dance halls. He was reportedly writing some of his own music by the time he was a teenager.

By age 20, Joplin had left Texarkana permanently and was a published composer. His first pieces, "A Picture of Her Face" and "Please Say You Will" (both from 1895), were not ragtime, but conventional waltzes. By 1899, however, he was an established ragtime composer, and his "Maple Leaf Rag," published that year, became an enormous best-seller, the first ragtime mega-hit. It should be remembered that Joplin's early hits were sold not as phonograph recordings, but as sheet music. Recordings, which would be the basis of the American popular music industry later, were still in the future. It is also important to note that Joplin was paid royalties (for "Maple Leaf," he was paid one cent per copy sold), and that this generated enough income to support him, so that he could devote all his time to composition.

From 1900 to 1910, Joplin published his best work, a series of piano rags that established him as "King of Ragtime Writers." He also composed a ballet, *The Ragtime Dance* (1902), and an opera, *The Guest of Honor* (1903). He continually campaigned for ragtime to be recognized as American classical music, and his compositions were, in fact, as carefully polished as anything in the European classical tradition. In 1908, he published an instruction book called *The School of Ragtime*, in which he insisted that ragtime be played exactly as written and be taken as seriously as works by European composers.

Joplin moved to New York in 1906, where he continued his work, spending more and more time on his opera, *Treemonisha*, a frustrating labor of love that failed to catch the interest of the public or of investors. The opera was published in 1911, but never had a full-scale production during Joplin's life. Frustration and failing health contributed to a nervous collapse sometime after 1911. During his final years, he wrote a few rags and recorded some of his works on piano rolls, but by 1916 he was in a hospital, where he died in early 1917.