

Scott Joplin's Ragtime Is Ambrosia. Here's Why It Matters.

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By [John McWhorter](#)

Friday is the anniversary of Scott Joplin's death in 1917. The story of this Black master of the ragtime genre can seem like one that never got far beyond the starting gate and ended with a sad decrescendo. He was raised in and around Texarkana, Texas, at turns made a living as a cornet player and a singer, and eventually published the best ragtime piano pieces of his era. He blended Black American syncopated rhythms and bluesy harmonies with European-derived classical and semiclassical forms, such as marches and waltzes, to create a new music shining with indigenous authenticity and refinement.

Though his composition "Maple Leaf Rag" is widely known — even people who don't know the title, or who wrote it, recognize the melody — and over time, at

least, the sheet music was a huge seller, Joplin's pieces were often too hard for the average pianist to play.

His written pieces were, in their way, standing admonitions to players more inclined to approach piano ragtime as sport, according to how fast and fancily they could bang it out. While some players of the day competed in head-to-head piano duels called "cutting contests," Joplin would affix his pieces with the warning — really, scolding: "[It is never right to play ragtime fast.](#)" Clearly, he wanted audiences to savor the melodies and harmonies like wine or, more to the point, like Mozart.

But the public's sense of what "ragtime" referred to evolved, just as terms like "cancel culture" and "critical race theory" have today, such that in the early 20th century, ragtime was often experienced less as piano compositions than as catchy little pop tunes, most resonantly as sung onstage. A song of this kind that has probably lived longest is Irving Berlin's "Alexander's Ragtime Band." In 1911, when it was released, this song was America's ragtime more than "Maple Leaf Rag," despite that for all the Berlin song's charm and craft, "Alexander's Ragtime Band" to "Maple Leaf Rag" is as deviled ham is to pâté de foie gras.

After years of moving around, alternately settling down and touring, Joplin moved to New York City in 1907. But he did not take his place among the cadre of Black musicians who had gathered there by this time, who infused mainstream pop with a Black element. These musicians, often followed by white musicians who reaped more of the glory and rewards, provided the jolt that transformed the Broadway sound: Will Marion Cook, Bob Cole and the brothers J. Rosamond and James Weldon Johnson got this ball rolling starting at the end of the 19th century, influencing white musicians such as Berlin, Jerome Kern and the now lesser-known [Louis Hirsch](#), celebrated as revolutionizing the show tune.

The more you study his life and career, the more it seems that Joplin was less devoted to Broadway, even though he reportedly wrote [a few stage works](#) that are now lost. My sense is that, despite having been [a member](#) of the Colored Vaudevillian Benevolent Association, Joplin was not as passionate about the performer-centered genres of Vaudeville and Broadway: He wanted audiences to focus on the music itself.

The culmination of Joplin's trajectory was an opera, "Treemonisha." It was not precisely a ragtime opera, and not quite a folk opera, though in some ways he anticipated George Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess." "Treemonisha" is the story of a Black woman in a small town who uses her education to coax her people away from belief in ghosts and charms, and the sinister peddlers who make their living selling them to the naïve. He had trouble drawing interest from publishers, and Joplin's life ended in illness and poverty, scraping by in an essentially common-law marriage.

The soundtrack of the 1973 heist comedy “The Sting,” with its signature piece, “The Entertainer,” brought his music back into public attention decades later, and the result was a ragtime revival, with E.L. Doctorow writing 1975’s “Ragtime,” a novel that was adapted for the screen in 1981, and a production and recording of “Treemonisha.” But “The Sting” will turn 50 next year, and ragtime is about as obscure now as it was before that movie came along. Why, then, is Joplin important today?

First, there is the sheer beauty of his work. The Joplin pieces you’re still likely to hear today are “The Entertainer” — partly because it’s relatively easy to play — and “Maple Leaf Rag,” because it’s God. But Joplin wrote many other pieces, less known but musically richer than those two, which sit in the mind right alongside Chopin: “Gladiolus Rag,” “Wall Street Rag,” “Magnetic Rag,” “Euphonic Sounds” and others deserve more attention. I have most recently enjoyed Richard Dowling’s [recording](#) of Joplin’s catalog. Also, the pianist Lara Downes has just released a fascinating [album](#) of creative interpretations of Joplin’s work. Wednesday in New York City, she and I will be [talking](#) about his work and why it matters.

Second, Joplin is more than just someone who wrote some great piano pieces, was Black and died. He is part of the [story of American classical music](#) that has never quite captured popular attention, where classical drinks in the musical substratum born here of Black and Native American and immigrant peoples and becomes something new. The Czech composer Antonin Dvorak sounded the call for such a music, wrote some examples, such as his Symphony No. 9, “From the New World,” but then went home. Gershwin, as I [have written](#), pointed the way with “Porgy and Bess” but then died young. Black composers such as William Grant Still, Florence Price, Margaret Bonds and William Levi Dawson continued the mission in the mid-20th century, but racism kept all but a few from hearing or knowing what they did.

Like Dvorak and Gershwin, Joplin was a part of this tradition. Like Gershwin, cut off too soon by death, he was composing a symphony by the end of his life as well as another theater piece. Also, his ragtime mission did not precisely end with him: In the last half-century, rags have been written that intriguingly blend modern classical harmonies (and manual virtuosity) with the ragtime form. William Bolcom’s [works](#) in this vein are invaluable. A nice way to get ragtime under the fingers while having something to play for people besides “The Entertainer” is to master Joplin’s “Gladiolus Rag” and then Bolcom’s “Graceful Ghost,” one of the prettiest piano pieces ever written, period.

Finally, the meme that Joplin died frustrated that he never saw “Treemonisha” performed, except for a rickety backer’s audition in an auditorium that elicited no takers, is false. It was performed at a theater in Bayonne, N.J., in 1913. That this was not Broadway did not mark it as a failure: In Joplin’s time, Broadway was

indeed central, but the essence of a piece's life was on the road. Whole careers flowered on tour while only ever stopping off briefly on Broadway — “New York's just a stand,” the actress Minnie Maddern Fiske once [said](#) during this era, just one place a performer passed through.

The conductor Rick Benjamin (who wrote the magisterial liner notes — essentially a book — for this [recording](#) of “Treemonisha”) says that Joplin could not have been staking his hopes on something as hopelessly unrealistic in the 1910s as white opera houses like New York's Met mounting a Black man's work about sharecroppers. Joplin wanted to communicate with Black audiences of his era, and there are indications in his scoring of the opera that he meant it to be played by a smallish ensemble, of a kind theater houses of modest means would have used at the time. That happened in Bayonne, and scattered advertisements and announcements suggest that for Joplin, “Treemonisha” was an ongoing project he was aiming at the venues he could find.

To get a sense of the man, I can't help recommending the 1970s biopic “Scott Joplin,” starring Billy Dee Williams. The dashing Williams was delightfully miscast as the rather reserved and socially unmemorable Joplin, but he did his job, and his charm at least helps dispel any notion that Joplin's life was a galumphing misfire. The movie has a fantastic cutting contest scene, in which the veteran pianist and composer Eubie Blake cameos. And, of course, the music is ambrosia.

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