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# The Musical World of Doctorow's *Ragtime*

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WHAT COULD E. L. DOCTOROW HAVE HAD IN MIND WHEN HE CHOSE *Ragtime* as the title of his best-selling novel of 1975? No more than a loose metaphor for an age if we go by the published literary criticism; for most of it focuses on narrative technique and the book's success or failure as a historical novel. It is time therefore to start reading the book completely, beginning with its title and the epigram by the black composer Scott Joplin.

Ragtime refers to a particular music, now considered timeless. But the term also identifies that era in the history of American music from 1896 to 1917, when Ragtime set a new agenda in popular music and ushered in a social revolution. While the first strains of this "novelty music" were heard as early as 1896, the ragtime "craze" began after the turn of the century. The time frame of Doctorow's novel extends from Stanford White's murder in 1906 to America's entry into World War I in 1916. The memory of the young boy, the principal narrator, reaches backward to 1902, when the house in New Rochelle was built, and forward to the marriage of Tateh and Mother in 1917, which happens to be the year of the Russian Revolution and of the first jazz recording. Doctorow's novel, then, covers the exact period when historical ragtime was a dominant style of American popular music.

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Ragtime's historical significance and current meaning are not identical, and the novel's epistemology is inspired by this difference. Historical ragtime was pioneered by blacks and initially resisted by the Victorian musical establishment. But after 1900 ragtime lost its association with black musicians and became a "white" music by national adoption. Hence black sounds entered the American mainstream in whiteface, as it were. James T. Maher writes: "The straight line from plantation music to the earliest recorded jazz (1917) runs through ragtime: the impact of Negro syncopation is the major force in the Americanization of our popular music."<sup>1</sup> After 1917 ragtime was replaced by jazz and Tin Pan Alley and gradually lost its status as the queen of popular music.

The more recent renaissance of ragtime began in the early seventies with a best-selling classical record of Joplin rags, recorded by Joshua Rifkin, a classical pianist with degrees from Juilliard and Princeton. The rehabilitation of ragtime by the musical establishment would have pleased Joplin, who had always insisted that his compositions should be listed under classical music. But ragtime soon reasserted its crossover appeal and went slumming again.<sup>2</sup> The success of the musical score of the film *The Sting* restored ragtime to the popular market and expanded its contemporary audience considerably. However, it also helped to increase the distance from historical ragtime and to obscure further the role of its creators. The film score of Joplin's music was nominated for two Oscars, but the awards were given not to Joplin, but to Marvin Hamlisch, who arranged the music for the film.<sup>3</sup>

If the ragtime renaissance of the seventies, which undoubtedly inspired the naming of the novel and helped to launch it to best-seller status, was a belated recognition of the music both in the classical and popular markets, it also constituted a subtle form of collective repression. A renaissance filters out the blood, sweat, and tears of the historical place and time that it evokes, while it foregrounds current, often nostalgic desire. This renaissance lifted ragtime out of its context and turned its history into metaphor or image (a key word in the novel). The historical music became the vehicle of a nostalgia for history with a set of associations quite different from the webs of significance in which the original producers and consumers were caught. The "re-arrangement" of black-derived ragtime in our structure of feeling, credit for which goes to the rearranger, mirrors the previous, "mistaken" adoption of this black foundling and its successful career in white

ragtime schools and publications. Understandably, the current nostalgia did not recognize that ragtime was in its time a revolutionary and an embattled black music and that one of its proud black creators died poor, alone, and maddened by the lack of public recognition. Indeed, the current "trivialized" recognition of ragtime as part of a throwaway musical culture may have shifted attention away from the story of ragtime which *Ragtime* tries to tell.

Doctorow articulates a justification for the "rediscovery" of ragtime and its age through the boy narrator, who not only "treasures anything discarded," but also is particularly interested in "meaning perceived through neglect."<sup>4</sup> This editorial aside invites us to read the novel as an attempt to reconstruct the conflict-laden musical universe at the time when ragtime entered into the mainstream of American music and to restore to consciousness what was repressed in the renaissance of ragtime. This reading is supported by a telling detail from Doctorow's biography which he elaborated on in his novel *World's Fair*. Doctorow's father ran a record store in Manhattan that served a mixed clientele of whites and blacks, and his uncle, a once famous jazz musician who had fallen on bad times, passed his knowledge of music history on to his nephew.

The "historical" novel *Ragtime*, then, is a form of biographical-anthropological fiction that apprehends and portrays, from the historical moment of the 1970s, the world of human desire and action of the turn of the century—history in the mode of participant observation over an interval of seventy years. This narrative stance, which deliberately merges past significance and present meaning, met with a mixed reaction from the novel's critics. Though the book was a popular success and received high praise, it was also called the most overrated novel of the year. Historians in particular found it antihistorical, anachronistic, frivolous, and irresponsible, a charge which, as this essay will argue, can only be upheld by readers deaf to the musical message.<sup>5</sup>

The disagreement over *Ragtime* hinges on the question of truth in historiography and historical fiction. Historian Cushing Strout, who has written the most articulate critique of the novel, praises Hawthorne's, Twain's and Dos Passos's historical fictions, even those that bend empirical facts for the sake of a moral point, but finds little to praise in *Ragtime*. On the one hand, Strout argues, *Ragtime* as narrative lacks an integrating, objective point of view. On the other hand, he faults the author for having obvious political, that is, subjective

interests, namely to give the black protagonist Coalhouse Walker Jr. more dignity and power than is his historical due. Strout argues that “its unannounced anachronisms make incredible this tale of a ragtime pianist . . . All these details are in a contemporary idiom at odds with the era of ragtime” (188). Most objectionable of all, Doctorow mixes “fidelity to historical details in 1902” with his own inventions. Therefore “the ragtime era is as frivolously manipulated as if it were only a tune.” The book, he continues, represents an attack on neutrality, objectivity, and impartiality as virtues in historiography, and it boils down to a cheapening of historiographical truth by obscuring the line between history and fiction. It is a “subversion of the conventional form by its deliberate affronts to the historical imagination.” Indeed, Doctorow breaks all conventions: “it is too historical for farce, too light-hearted for the rage of black humor, and too caricatured for history” (193). Last but not least, it is irreverent and populist: “appropriately this book was promoted in the media like a popular song, whatever his own intentions may have been” (191). This list of sins against *Clio*’s purpose adds up to a summary statement of Doctorow’s aesthetic.

Hardest to swallow for Strout is Doctorow’s loss of faith in the truth of historiographical “fictions,” to which the latter pleads guilty in his essay “False Documents.”<sup>6</sup> There Doctorow merely radicalizes certain doubts that have inspired modern novelists and historians since Flaubert and Nietzsche: like them, he entertains a philosophical skepticism towards all man-made narratives. Like them, he doubts the “dogma of immaculate perception” (Nietzsche) embraced by a Rankean historiography which purports to narrate history “as it actually was.” Like them, he realizes that all narrated facts are socially constructed and therefore charged with human interest beyond their mere facticity. Inevitably, our modern historical consciousness is a product and victim of the market of ideas. It has become—like the world it reflects—industrialized, that is, saturated with ready-made, prepackaged and widely disseminated narratives of the social and historical sciences.<sup>7</sup> One might add on a critical note that the philosophy that fuels Doctorow’s doubt is not exactly revolutionary and has in its turn become a bit of an industry.

Doctorow’s epistemological agnosticism towards “objective” history explains the absence of an objective, integrating point of view. He argues in “False Documents” that an “objective historiographical point of view” unburdened by the benefit of hindsight is the greatest

fiction of all. Instead we are prisoners of the contemporary, enmeshed in narrative agendas not of our making. Therefore Doctorow presents a confusion of voices and narratives vacillating between the past and present and mixing real and invented figures. Yet, the moral center of the narrative consciousness is firmly anchored—how could it be otherwise?—in the subjectivity of the author rather than in a historical time. This conscious moral orientation in the present (*Commentary* called his a position of Jewish radicalism) implies a recognition of the inevitability of our historical place.<sup>8</sup> There is no escape from our perspective even when we naively believe, like Strout, in the possibility of an objective stance in the past unburdened by knowledge of events to come.<sup>9</sup> The boy's words to Houdini "warn the Duke" (of the impending assassination which would ignite World War I) are indeed anachronistic, but intended as a warning to us of the impossibility of escape from the hermeneutic prison.

It could be argued that Doctorow shows more respect for a "truth of the heart" by insisting that all narratives, historical, fictional, and biographical, are written from contemporary points of view and have to be decoded as fictions of their time. In Walter Benjamin's words we are prophets of the past with our backs to the future.<sup>10</sup> Strout's parting shot in calling the book as irrelevant as a ragtime tune does not bode well for a serious reading of the musical story.

But even if we disregard the epistemological tack of the novel and merely insist on historical accuracy, *Ragtime* is true enough to salient, though neglected facts of American music history. For it picks up some of the zany contradictions of ethnicity and class at that particular juncture in the development of American popular music. By the 1970s certain historical and cultural results of that ethnic and class mix had become manifest, notably in the emergence of ethnic agents and agendas in all fields of inquiry, and novelists of historical fiction would profit from the benefit of hindsight. Given his background, Doctorow himself is one "result" of the mixture of ethnicity and class he describes. In this sense, *Ragtime* is "autobiographical" because it identifies Doctorow's social and epistemological place both in America's real and narrative history as a result of the very forces of history and historiography which the novel captures. Doctorow chooses the narrated bits of predigested history carefully; sometimes just a symbol or an icon of the age will evoke a revisionist controversy over historical meaning.

A good example of his metonymic style is his handling of three

icons of the age: the upright piano, the Model T Ford and film. Of the three the piano may serve as the best example. It is of special significance since the assault of black ragtime on white respectability used the queen of instruments, the piano, which was considered a Victorian "moral institution." According to the *New York Times* of the day "the pianoforte more than any other single object will be looked upon in the years to come as the emblem of the Victorian age."<sup>11</sup> The production figures bear this out. In 1909, the year when some of the most important events in the novel unfold, the sales of upright pianos reached an all-time peak. It was also the year when Congress passed a copyright law to secure income for composers from music serialized on piano rolls. The choice of a black pianist as protagonist of the novel is not incidental. The musical world of Coalhouse Walker Jr., Scott Joplin, and James Reese Europe connects with the industrial world of Henry Ford and J. P. Morgan via the Model T Ford, the principal incarnate of relentless serial production. The third icon of the age, the moving pictures, represented by Tateh and his inventions, highlights the role of visual representation in the age of mechanical reproduction.<sup>12</sup>

The narrative mirrors the spirit of automation; its components are "moveable parts," namely the case studies, personality typing and composite social portraiture from history, sociology, and psychology that have settled into conventional wisdom. These recycled narrative units are in Doctorow's words "industrialized forms of storytelling," which he brings into his own, jagged order and which he dots with cynical or compassionate asides.<sup>13</sup> This creates an effect which might be called the narrative equivalent of syncopation. The overall organizing principle is, as in ragtime, a system of contradictions, most abstractly between being and becoming, or between metamorphosis and stasis, a system which fans out into all sorts of concrete oppositions. In terms of narrative timing there is both a forward drive and a holding back, an "accelerando" and "ritardando." The novel moves, in Doctorow's own words, "at an absolutely relentless pace." Yet at the same time the voice of Scott Joplin urges us in the epigram: "Do not play this piece fast. It is never right to play Ragtime fast. . . ."<sup>14</sup> Surely the human agents may be divided into those that resist speedy transformation and would rather hold on to eternal, biological, or deterministic master plans (Father, Morgan, Ford), and those who favor "bricolage" such as Tateh, the "artist," who decides to arrange "his life along the lines of flow of American energy," and Mother, who



gladly adjusts to liberating innovations. On its most metaphysical level the novel is a meditation on the psychopathology of the culture industry caught between a desire for progress and a dread of change so typical of modernization in the Progressive era.<sup>15</sup> It is necessary to take another look at the entire musical story the novel tells.

The years from 1896 to 1917 mark the period of intense modernization in American culture. In music and in industrial production, and surely in their unique fusion that gave us American popular music and its cultural industry, this is a transitional period. By 1896, industrial production had nearly consolidated, but there was not yet a culture of consumption to match it. By the 1920s, however, the mass cultural industry was firmly in place. In terms of music history, then, ragtime fits snugly between the older era of sheet music and the modern age of the player piano, the record player, and the radio. The music by Stephen Foster and Charles Harris written in the late nineteenth century required a publishing network, song pluggers and a musically literate audience. The music of the 1920s by Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, and Harold Arlen reached, via records and radio, a large multi-ethnic audience that no longer needed literate skills. The dominant sound technology of the ragtime era, that is, piano rolls and player pianos (one of which, in the novel, is taken by Peary to the North Pole), is of a transitional nature. Piano rolls and the player piano (which were marketed on a large scale after 1902) marked the beginning of the age of automation in the reproduction of sounds. These sounds are forever inscribed in the rolls, which may be produced in series and *en masse*. Yet the rolls require as a sound carrier the old venerable piano, which has to be activated by human effort. The production of player pianos had risen constantly from the introduction of the Pianola by the Aeolian Company in 1902, to 1923, when 56 percent of all pianos were automated. Piano sales tapered off after 1909 and declined drastically in the 1920s when the improved recording technology facilitated not only the recording by microphone and the reproduction of performed music by relatively cheaper record players, but also its dissemination by radio. By 1929 production figures were down to 35 percent of the earlier high in 1923.<sup>16</sup>

Ragtime is transitional in yet another sense. Before 1896 popular songs were all of one generic kind—they were essentially based on the European *lied* tradition or on waltzes and marches. Though there were new and unheard (black) strains in Stephen Foster's



minstrel-derived songs, they did not mark a radical departure from the European models. Besides, his innovations did not catch on, nor did they settle into the racist tradition of coon songs. In classical music there was no American-born classical composer of note with the exception of Louis Moreau Gottschalk (whose influence on Joplin can be heard by the discriminating ear), and he was ignored.<sup>17</sup> The classical canon was dominated by Europeans. The class division between classical and popular musical cultures deepened increasingly as classical music, in the epithet of Lawrence Levine, became “sacralized” toward the end of the century.<sup>18</sup> With the coming of ragtime and jazz, however, two indigenous American musical grammars arose which straddled, or ignored, these class and cultural barriers and which held great appeal for the new ethnics, particularly for Jews. Neither jazz nor ragtime produced an exclusively mass cultural or elitist type of music. To be sure, both could be trivialized for mass cultural purposes, yet they also allowed the highest musical achievement. Both jazz and ragtime were indeed commodified (which accounts for one of the most egregious misjudgments of Theodor W. Adorno who dismissed jazz as *essentially* proto-fascist),<sup>19</sup> but ragtime and jazz also yielded a crop of superb creative artists, and inspired many classical composers including Charles Ives, Maurice Ravel, Claude Debussy, Igor Stravinsky, Darius Milhaud, and, quite clearly, George Antheil and Kurt Weill.

In terms of cultural history then, ragtime marks a transitional phase in the coming of age of an Afro-American musical aesthetic which would find its classic form in jazz. Gunther Schuller writes:

rhythmically ‘ragging’ melodies and themes was only one step removed from loosening them (musical pieces) up even further through improvisation and melodic embellishment. Thus, many of the earliest jazz musicians were essentially ragtime players, or, to put it more precisely, musicians who were transitional in the progress from a relatively rigid, notated, non-improvised music (ragtime) to a looser, more spontaneously inventive performance style (jazz).<sup>20</sup>

The Afro-American aesthetic initiated by ragtime and jazz does not so much represent a specific genre of music, but rather projects a world view, namely a uniquely urban, modernist attitude of improvisation, invention, and “bricolage.”<sup>21</sup> After the pastoral and small town tradition of nineteenth-century song, America acquired in ragtime a music in tune with city life and its new ethnic populations.

Until the turn of the century, the musical canon of the United States was largely dominated by Europe. Classical music was imported from Italy, France, and, toward the end of the century, increasingly from Germany. Musical taste was primarily determined by German cultural custodians such as Theodore Thomas, Anton Seidl, Karl Muck, and their American allies, and American boys and girls who were musically disciplined by the *Klavier Schule* of Siegmund Lebert and Ludwig Stark which by 1884 had seen seventeen editions. Among immigrant workers the European song tradition was alive. Brigit, the Irish maid in *Ragtime*, listens to John McCormack's "I Hear You Calling Me," a typical example of imported ethnic folk music, some of which survived the ravages of industrialization better in America than in Europe.<sup>22</sup> Up to the turn of the century American popular music, with a few notable exceptions such as Stephen Foster and James Bland, consisted of songs imported from Europe or of songs written by immigrant songwriters such as Victor Herbert and Rudolf Friml, who are mentioned in the novel as Peary's favorites. Herbert's "Gold Bug" was an all-time favorite in America, but it would be hard to identify what is "American" about it. Even second-generation songwriters such as Harry Von Tilzer or Paul Dresser, the fat and prosperous brother of Theodore Dreiser, wrote a slightly Americanized copy of European song. Von Tilzer, for one, composed beer garden waltzes such as "Down Where the Würzburger Flows" (which he followed with "Under the Anheuser-Bush"), and Dresser joined the ranks of the "shameless motherlovers" with his immortal air "I Believe It For My Mother Told Me So."<sup>23</sup> Other jingles from their pens are "The Letter That Never Came," "The Convict And The Bird," and "The Outcast Unknown."

An all-time hit and therefore representative of musical taste in the early 1890s was "After the Ball" (1892) by Charles K. Harris, an East European Jew who in all likelihood had changed his name. This was terribly sentimental stuff. The lyrics tell of a little girl who climbs upon her old uncle's knee and asks "Why are you not married?" Then he tells the story "I had a sweetheart once, but I caught her kissing another man at a ball," whereupon he breaks the engagement only to find out much later, when it was too late to make amends, that the man his sweetheart kissed at the ball was her brother. The song is a perfect Victorian vehicle of sentimental schmaltz, made up of frustrated desire, the negation of bliss, stiff moral principles, and a hearty dose

of self-denial in the tradition recorded by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch.

This world of rarified Victorian virtues that Father and Mother live in inspires Doctorow to savage satire. Sex is taboo and, when encountered, causes fainting spells. Procreation continues—after a fashion—with a bad conscience on the part of the male and with clenched fists, closed eyes and a prayer on the lips of the female. Much later in the novel, after Mother learns to swing, she begins to push back, much to the surprise of Father who thought this was a somewhat gauche habit of Eskimo women. Father is the image of prosperous frustration: he drops out of Harvard (a Harvard interruptus) then becomes a frustrated explorer with Peary and Henson (the latter, a black, ousts him from Peary's graces). The account of Father's sexual encounter with Eskimo women is by no means fanciful fiction. Members of the Peary expedition left their traces in the gene pool of the Inuit, and thanks to Henson's high pigmentation his offspring was traced in Northern Greenland. Harvard University recently invited Henson's son and grandchildren for a commemoration of the black explorer. However, Peary's entire enterprise has been called into question. Recent scholarship expresses some doubt that he ever made it to the North Pole, to the center that holds. Doubly frustrated Father returns to a life defined by the sudden appearance of a deserted black baby, whom Mother takes in, followed by the mother of that baby and by Coalhouse Walker Jr., the father, who upset the harmony of the previous, Victorian world. Before Father fully appreciates what has happened to his life-style he sinks with the *Lusitania*, taking his world, his culture, and his weapons with him. "*Untergang des Abendlands.*"

John Philip Sousa, also mentioned in the novel, gave America its imperial and ceremonial music, such as "President Garfield's Inauguration March" of 1881. His name should alert us that ethnics were not entirely innocent in the creation of such music. Sousa's father was Portuguese, his mother Bavarian. His repertoire, though clearly indebted to European military music, included pieces with a new beat and "American" melodies. Though critical of ragtime and wary of the "menace of mechanical music," he reacted to audience demands and flirted with a variety of American traditions, among them black music or, at least, whatever part of it transpired through the minstrel mask. A recording from 1905 called "Silence and Fun: A Ragtime Oddity" is not ragtime and to our ears not particularly odd. Sousa sounded much better than the very early recordings allow for. Although this

type of marching music was a European derivative, it represented, at its best, an American improvement of a European tradition. Sousa's brand of music, it should be said, was not without influence on Joplin and other ragtime composers.

Then came ragtime. The music had a new musical grammar, marked by syncopation, which, as its detractors pointed out, could be found in music before the ragtime craze. However, the "constant collision between internal melodic and underlying rhythms was its *raison d'être*, not one of many stylistic features."<sup>24</sup> This permanent tension in melody and rhythm reflected and spoke to a different libidinal structure. It mirrored the contradictions of urban living and projected a new urban attitude that the French call "*Je m'en foutisme*" (I don't give a damn). In 1896, a tune with recognizable ragtime features and a jaunty melody hit the charts. The lyrics of this ragtime song shed the maudlin sentimentality so popular before and were recognizably closer to the tradition of Afro-American humor: "You've Been a Good Old Wagon, But You Done Broke Down," a tune that would later become a favorite of Bessie Smith. It is significant that this song had not only a verse, but also—and this may be read as a black touch—a "chorus" and a "dance." The composer and author was one Ben Harney, who has remained a somewhat mysterious figure. Yet, whatever we know or don't know about him makes the actions of Brother in the novel (who "blacks up" as a radical inversion of a minstrel Sambo) seem not so strange after all. Harney was introduced on the cover of the song as "the Original Introducer to the Stage of the New Popular Rag Time in Ethiopian Song." Eubie Blake, a black ragtime pianist, claimed that Harney was a black man who had passed for white, prefiguring James Weldon Johnson's "ex-coloured man," another fictional ragtime pianist. Others say Harney was a white man who passed for a black man passing for white. Harney left no record that would clearly establish his genealogy. Whatever his pigmentation may have been, the historical fact of this confusion marks an important threshold in American culture: the eruption of black rhythms into the mainstream of music and the gradual takeover by blacks of its musical grammar.

Ragtime was the musical "high yeller" black baby left at the doorsteps of white folks who gladly adopted it, some of them not even realizing it was black. There is another significant historical fact: Ben Harney's ragtime song was published by a company of second-generation German Jews by the name of Witmark.<sup>25</sup> Julius Witmark (who would

correspond to Tateh in the novel) actually served as a midwife to bring this new child, black song, to the light of day. Eubie Blake, for one, was a Witmark author, and, though never overly fond of ragtime, he played it then and into our days as demonstrated by the recording—at the age of ninety in 1979—of his “Charleston Rag” (1917). Like Coalhouse Walker Jr. he belonged to a new breed of blacks who were willing to challenge the system of overt and covert racism. Ford and Father were suddenly surrounded by clever Jews and uppity Afro-Americans.

Race relations were at an all-time low at the turn of the century. The year of Harney’s hit was also the year of the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision of the Supreme Court which cemented segregation. In the musical market, writes Sam Dennison, “cover illustrations adorning sheet music of the 1890s became more colorful and more insulting to blacks than at any other time in the history of American popular song.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore the range of “revolutionary cultural possibilities” for Afro-Americans was clearly limited. We tend to judge the black agents of this era negatively when compared to those of the Harlem Renaissance or the Black Cultural Revolution of the sixties whose achievements in “advancing the race” were more visible. But to be “black and proud” was much harder in 1896. The first and hardest job, and this is what ragtime was all about, was to overcome the unthinking racism of minstrelsy inscribed in musical taste as in cultural behavior.<sup>27</sup>

Times had already changed, if ever so subtly, by 1906. Coalhouse Walker Jr. was the representative of a new group of urban blacks. One has to read the novel carefully for the many subtle data of musical history. On Coalhouse’s first visit to the house in 1909 he is asked by Father to play one of the popular “coon songs.” These were popular tunes of the day which had emerged with minstrelsy and which made seemingly innocent fun of blacks. Coalhouse Walker Jr. quite firmly refuses. He also carefully wipes the keys of this middle-class white piano (produced by the Aeolian company) before starting to play. For a first demonstration of his talent he does not select a tune already popular with white audiences, but pointedly chooses “The Wall Street Rag” by Scott Joplin, a new composition hot off the presses in 1909, which foreshadows Walker’s later challenge to the capitalist system embodied by the J. P. Morgan Library.<sup>28</sup> Later on, as a concession to white folks, he encores with a well-known hit, “Maple Leaf Rag.” All this on an upright piano which, to the chagrin of his white hosts,

he judges “badly in need of a tuning.” Times had changed and were, perhaps, from Father’s point of view, already out of tune. Though the “new negro” was a few years hence, there was already a new breed represented by figures such as George Walker, the brothers James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson, Bob Cole, Will Marion Cook, and James Reese Europe.<sup>29</sup> Their historical role has not been properly acknowledged by mainstream historians of American culture. These young blacks represented a recognizable urban cohort that was subversively active in the creation of new types of *American* popular entertainment. The irony and the subversion lie in the fact that the Americanization of music through ragtime resulted in the blackening of the American musical grammar at the worst possible moment in race relations. And to add ethnic insult to nativist injury immigrant Jews were its midwives or secondliners. Most American music in the twentieth century is of course black-derived, but ragtime marks that crucial moment when black music began to set the agenda. Before it was “Swanee River” and “After the Ball,” now it was “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” by Irving Berlin and “Shuffle Along” by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake.

This brings us to a second theme of the novel, which also captures the chief ambition of black ragtime players between 1900 and 1917. Frederick Douglass defined the black political agenda as the quest for literacy and freedom. These quests are reflected in ragtime; ragtime is a composed, that is, literate, music. Though a popular genre in terms of its public appeal, ragtime draws its rules of composition and performance from the discipline of the classical tradition. Implied in this music was a quest for freedom from the shackles of minstrelsy (both as a form of oral, unsophisticated entertainment and as a form of servile behavior expected of black musicians). White patrons of minstrel shows continued to ask for Tambo and Bones on the public stage and would have cared little for well-groomed and literate black pianists. These black musicians, however, whose expressive repertoire was limited by the tyranny of white expectation, began to divorce themselves from the spirit of minstrelsy by creating alternatives to minstrel music. This divorce was not easy; and for a long time ragtime was simply taken on board by minstrel shows as a welcome new feature. Coon songs were played as rags and ragtime songs retained the “jingle with the broken tongue,” as Paul Laurence Dunbar called the pseudoblack



dialect in which white readers expected him to deliver his poetry. But latent in the music was a new revolutionary option which would eventually mature and graduate from the minstrel show.

Undoing the shackles, the corsets, the encrustations, opening the closets—this is a major theme of the novel. Houdini turns escape (from his working-class Jewish background) into a compulsive art, Evelyn Nesbit throws off her corset, so does Mother, quietly. Toward the end of the novel when the rain makes her garments cling to her body, her mature sensual form is visible to an appreciative Tateh who has by this time in the novel overcome his rigid orthodox mores. Ragtime stood for more than just musical change: for its white listeners, at any rate, it connoted doing away with self-denial. And this liberation concerned culturally determined libidinal structures, in short, rhythm. Why else would Doctorow send Freud and Jung through the Tunnel of Love?<sup>30</sup>

We may reconstruct the libidinal charge of ragtime at this historical moment *ex negativo*, from the reaction to ragtime by mainstream classical musicians.<sup>31</sup> Today ragtime may seem innocent enough, just the thing for encores in classical concerts, for music students bored with Clementi or for film scores. But we are children of the musical and libidinal liberation that ragtime set in motion. For us, as for the little boy, “there seemed no other possibilities for life than those delineated by the music” (183). The reaction to ragtime by established musicians in the early part of this century was related to the pervasive feeling of decline common among the ruling classes, as expressed in Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race* of 1916. From their perspective, ragtime had to appear as a pathological, immoral, patently sexual, and subversive instrument of decline. The composer Daniel Gregory Mason thundered: “Let us purge America and the Divine Art of Music from this polluting nonsense.” Hans Muck, the director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, concurred, “I think that what you call ragtime is poison. . . . A person inoculated with the ragtime fever is like one addicted to strong drink.” Others charged that it led to permanent brain damage or that it would wreck the nervous system. “Its greatest destructive power lies in its power to lower the moral standards.” A man named Walter Winston Kenilworth wrote a letter to the Paris editor of the *New York Herald-Tribune* in 1913 which was later reprinted in the *Musical Courier*. It sums up negatively what the novel is all about:



Can it be said that America is falling prey to the collective soul of the negro through the influence of what is popularly known as "rag time" music? . . . If there is any tendency toward such a national disaster, it should be definitely pointed out and extreme measures taken to inhibit the influence and avert the increasing danger—if it has not already gone too far . . . The American "rag time" or "rag time" evolved music is symbolic of the primitive morality and perceptible moral limitations of the negro type. With the latter sexual restraint is almost unknown, and the widest altitude of moral uncertainty is conceded.<sup>32</sup>

A New England music critic concurred and, in jumbled prose which mirrors his nativist *angst*, continued the argument by defining the role of the Jew in this nefarious plot to destroy Aryan America:

Ragtime is a mere comic strip representing American vices. Here is a rude noise which emerged from the hinterlands of brothels and dives, presented in a negroid manner by Jews most often, so popular that even high society Vanderbilts dance to it. All this syncopated music wasn't American, it is unamerican. The Jew and the Yankee stand in human temperance at polar points. The Jew has oriental extravagance and sensuous brilliance. However, ragtime is a reflection of these raucous times; it is music without a soul.<sup>33</sup>

These apocalyptic reactions are by now familiar in the history of jazz and popular music. They articulate a latent fear of instability and libidinal freedom associated with the threatening Other, represented at this time by blacks and Jews.

To white cultural custodians ragtime may have heralded the decline of the West, to black middle-class musicians, most of all to Scott Joplin and James Reese Europe, it was a conscious departure from debasing minstrelsy and an entry into serious, literate, and classical black music. We witness a misunderstanding across the racial divide over the meaning of black musical emancipation, a drama of mistaken motives and cross purposes. For the white musical power structure the "libertinism" of ragtime threatened to destroy the moral fiber of the nation and indicated a lowering of moral standards; for blacks its acceptance as serious music was part of a political struggle for dignity. Coalhouse Walker Jr. is the pianist in Jim Reese Europe's Clef Orchestra, which was the finest black brass band, dance and symphony orchestra of the time and the first black orchestra to storm the citadel of high culture, Carnegie Hall, in 1914.

Within larger orchestras the piano has always been a central instrument. The pianist in the orchestra is the arranger; he can read, and he is in charge of literacy. Coalhouse Walker Jr.'s job gives us his

professional profile within the black culture of the day. His status is furthermore apparent in that he is one of the first motorists of the brand-new Model T Ford which came off the production line in 1909. Could it be that Doctorow is having a bit of fun here in connecting the two icons of the novel, the piano and the Model T? One of the two historical pianists of the Jim Reese Europe orchestra in the first decade of the century and cofounder of the Clef Club was a fellow by the name of Ford T. Dabney who has a good number of compositions to his credit.<sup>34</sup>

Mastery over the piano and ownership of the Ford Model T are symbols of the new achievement and the new dignity, the new spirit of human possibility and human principle which Walker represents. His reply to the spirit of interracial practical joking enacted by the Irish firemen in *Ragtime* and by innumerable white comics in blackface is a firm “we are no longer amused, we are a serious people.” In this he resembled not only Michael Kohlhaas, but also, closer to home, black artists James Reese Europe, Bob Cole, George Walker, and Bert Williams, who had to work on the borderline between minstrelsy and serious black music, or the pianist Eubie Blake, and last but not least, Joplin, who created the most memorable compositions in ragtime and whose life is a dramatization of Walker’s purpose. For Walker’s subsequent behavior in the novel, the sequence of incidents leading to the bombing of the fire stations and the wiring up of J. P. Morgan’s library, there is no historical parallel, but it may be taken as an objective correlative—in present day terms—of the deep symbolic hurt and anger of urban blacks such as Joplin.

Joplin was a serious artist who wanted nothing more than to be recognized as a composer of serious music. “Do not play this piece fast. It is never right to play ragtime fast.” This exasperated warning, which Joplin had printed on many of his compositions and which Doctorow chose as the epigram of the novel, is crucial. It is a sentence loaded with musical and historical meaning. Why would Joplin make such a fuss over those interpreters who play his music as if the name set a fast metronome? Joplin prefaced an edition of his music without any of the modesty which in those days was expected of blacks of any station:

What is scurrilously called ragtime is an invention that is here to stay. That is now conceded by all classes of musicians. That all publications masquerading under the name of ragtime are not the genuine article will be better known when these exercises are studied. That real ragtime of the higher

class is rather difficult to play is a painful truth which most pianists have discovered. Syncopations are no indication of light and trashy music, and to shy bricks at "hateful" ragtime no longer passes for musical culture. To assist amateur players in giving the "Joplin Rags" that weird and intoxicating effect intended by the composer is the object of this work.<sup>35</sup>

Joplin complained that imitators tended to Taylorize his music, giving it the sound of a machine, when in fact syncopation and its "weird and intoxicating effect" upset the regularity of a mechanical beat. "Play it slow until you catch the swing" he advised those of his pupils, who like Admiral Peary were proud of pumping out the "Minute Waltz" in forty-eight seconds.

Joplin's warning may have been the first inadvertent acknowledgment of a basic difference between European-American and black music making (which may also imply a difference between a modern-technocratic and a preindustrial sense of time). Due to the improvement of instrument technology and due to the premium placed on *technical* mastery, a tacit context seems to have developed among Western musicians in the period of modernization to step up the speed of music—performances which have given us Zez Confrey and Liberace in popular music, and Glenn Gould in the classics. Indeed it has been in the realm of technical mastery where white imitators of black jazz musicians have succeeded best, namely in doing fast numbers; where many break down is in ballads and blues. The difference lies not in the *choice* of pace, but in "timing" on the one hand and in "attack" or "sound" on the other, which show up best in slow numbers. Afro-American timing, attack and sound, which are part of a rhythmic grammar (hence related to dance), have not too often been the forte of white jazz musicians (particularly those with classical training), yet it is the essence of what is called black "soul." Joplin's dogged insistence on correct timing therefore has black cultural nationalist implications.<sup>36</sup>

It also brings to the foreground a contradiction between the conflicting goals of political emancipation and of the quest for a black cultural identity, which surfaces for the first time in American culture during the period. The dilemma was that before ragtime could be accepted beyond a black ethnic horizon, it had to shed just enough of the roughness of the (black) country and adopt just enough of the sophistication of the (white) city without losing its "innovative" appeal. Ragtime had to adapt to or "compromise with" the tyranny of classical musical norms to the extent of becoming competitive and compatible

within a larger market. A black cultural pioneer such as Joplin, whose goal was the political emancipation of his music, had to master these norms through the music, yet not succumb to their hegemony by a slavish compliance with the dictates of a Western metronome. His political balancing act was to retain as much of the Afro-American pace and sensibility as the market would accept. Hence, his dogged insistence on “timing” (that is, on saving the dance) as the important Afro-American cultural marker. Is it surprising then that Joplin, whose score of *Treemonisha* was at best sketchy and incomplete, left most elaborate instructions for the choreography of the dance number “Real Slow Drag” in his opera?

Ragtime is revolutionary by introducing an Afro-American structure of feeling to Western music and dance. To attract promoters Joplin had, shortly before his death, staged a concert version of his opera. It failed miserably. After that *Treemonisha* was never performed in full and was practically forgotten until the 1960s when music historian Vera Brodsky Lawrence reissued the works of Joplin, and then Robert Shaw and the music department at Morehouse College produced a first hearing in 1972. Gunther Schuller saw to it that the opera was performed by a professional company.<sup>37</sup> Vera Brodsky Lawrence writes in the liner notes:

To early twentieth century America it was unthinkable, inadmissible, and intolerable that a black composer—worse yet, a black composer of vulgar ragtime—should attempt to invade the inviolably white precincts of white opera. Publishers, however willing to issue Joplin’s highly salable piano rags, turned a deaf ear to the outrageous concept of publishing his full-length opera. Who would buy it? Or perform it? Apparently nobody, for producer after producer and publisher after publisher successively rejected *Treemonisha*; and Joplin, who with each refusal became more compulsively determined to see the work published and staged, committed himself irretrievably to the tragic and futile quest that was to obsess and possess him for the remaining decade of his life.<sup>38</sup>

Here is a musical Michael Kohlhaas. The ragtime pianist Coalhouse Walker Jr. is clearly a representative of the ragtime age. But should we take Joplin’s ambition to be accepted as a classical composer as seriously as Coalhouse’s demand to be respected as a citizen? Was Joplin not rightly forgotten? After listening to Gunther Schuller’s and the Houston Symphony Orchestra’s rendition of “Real Slow Drag” who would need further proof of Scott Joplin’s talent? Clearly Joplin

is a master of choral composition and brings to opera the complicated rhythms and the call and response patterns of black folk music, indeed "verse," "chorus," and "dance." And his detailed instructions for the choreography set the stage for jazz dance. Had he been given recognition and support he might have built up a sizeable *oeuvre* which would have preceded *Porgy and Bess* by decades and which would have established him as the first black cultural nationalist. Moreover, the black opera *Treemonisha* was a logical step in the quest for literacy and freedom implicit in ragtime. The libretto of the opera reflects Joplin's abiding belief that the black path to dignity and civil rights lay through education. (Like the black baby in the novel, the heroine of *Treemonisha* was found by her foster parents as a baby under a tree, hence the name Tree-Monisha.)

Scott Joplin died in 1917, a frustrated and angry man.<sup>39</sup> Even a cursory look at Joplin's work and biography would have laid to rest the claim that the novel's sense of history is contrived or that Coalhouse Walker Jr. is "in no way typical of the prewar years." The novel merely translates Joplin's anger and frustration as a creative Afro-American of his time into action and plot understood in our time.<sup>40</sup> We ought to take the author's choice of a musical title seriously.

Recordings of musical examples referred to in the text:

- 1) John McCormack, "I Hear You Calling Me." *John McCormack Sings Irish Songs and Traditional Melodies*, Murray Hill Records S-4359.
- 2) Victor Herbert, "The Gold Bug." *A Bicentennial Celebration. 200 Years of American Music*, played by the Goldman Band in 1976. CBS AL 33838.
- 3) John Philip Sousa, "President Garfield's Inauguration March." Played by the Goldman Band in 1976, loc. cit.
- 4) John Philip Sousa's band, "Silence and Fun: A Ragtime Oddity" (Mullen) rec. 25. 10. 1905, from *Ragtime*, Jazz Tribune No. 42, 1983, RCA PM 45687.
- 5) Minstrel Show: *Gentlemen Be Seated. A Complete Minstrel Show*, Epic 3238.
- 6) Bessie Smith, "You've Been A Good Ole Wagon." *Bessie Smith. The Empress*, Louis Armstrong cornet; Fred Longshaw p. Jan. 14 1925. Columbia G 30818 n.d.
- 7) Eubie Blake, "Charleston Rag." *New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival: 10th Anniversary*, Sonet Productions, SNTF 812A, 1979.
- 8) Jim Reese Europe's Society Orchestra, "Down Home Drag" (Wilbur C. Sweatman), Cricket Smith (cnt), unidentified (tb), Edgar Campbell (cl), Tracy Cooper, George Smith Waltker Scott (vnl), Leonard Smith, Ford T. Dabney (p), five banjoman-doline players unidentified, Charles "Buddy" Gilmore (dr), James "Reese" Europe (cond.). New York, Dec. 29, 1913, from *Ragtime*, loc. cit.
- 9) Scott Joplin, "Real Slow Rag." *Scott Joplin, Ragtime: Original Piano Rolls 1896-1917*, Musidisc A 396, 1987.

10) Scott Joplin, "Real Slow Drag." Act 3, *Treemonisha*. With Gunther Schuller & the Houston Opera Company 1975. Deutsche Grammophon, 2707 083, 1976.

#### NOTES

1. As quoted by Alec Wilder, *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators 1900–1950* (New York, 1972), 12.

2. Most of the credit for the academic rediscovery of ragtime must go to Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, *They All Played Ragtime* (New York, 1950), a groundbreaking study that has gone through many editions. Two recent publications stand out: Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1980) and John Edward Hasse, ed., *Ragtime: Its History, Composers, and Music* (New York, 1985).

3. Arnold Shaw, *Black Popular Music in America* (New York, 1986), 50.

4. E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime* (New York, 1976), 131. All quotes are from this edition.

5. Richard Todd, "The-Most-Overrated-Book-of-the-Year-Award and other Literary Prizes," *Atlantic* (Jan. 1976): 95–96, and Cushing Strout, *The Veracious Imagination: Essays on American History, Literature, and Biography* (Middletown, Conn., 1981) criticize the book for mixing history and fact. Barbara Foley, "From U.S.A. to Ragtime: Notes on the Forms of Historical Consciousness in Modern Fiction," in Richard Trenner, ed., *E. L. Doctorow: Essays & Conversations* (Princeton, N.J., 1983) draws unfavorable parallels to Dos Passos's work. See Paul Levine's *E. L. Doctorow* (London, 1985) for a more balanced assessment.

6. E. L. Doctorow, "False Documents," *American Review* 26 (1977): 215–32.

7. Doctorow's use of "industrialized fictions" is neither new nor postmodern. Gustave Flaubert created two memorable characters Bouvard and Pécuchet who attempt to collate all popular "*idéés reçues*" into one book.

8. Doctorow, "False Documents." Carol Iannone, "E. L. Doctorow's 'Jewish' Radicalism," *Commentary* (Mar. 1986): 53–56.

9. If Doctorow had added Strout to his pandemonium of figures in the novel the latter would belong to the Fathers, Fords, and Morgans, who aspire to objectivity, ontological fixity, order, law, the North Pole or other centers that hold.

10. Walter Benjamin, "Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen," *Illuminationen* (Frankfurt, 1961), 272. F. Scott Fitzgerald uses a similar image in *The Great Gatsby* which closes on a philosophical note: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

11. W. J. Turner, as quoted in Craig H. Roell, *The Piano in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill, 1989), 267.

12. It should be noted that Tateh, the Jewish socialist from Latvia, reinvents himself as the Hollywood tycoon Baron Ashkenazy, who finally marries Mother and settles in California. Looking out from his study he sees "his daughter, with dark hair, his tow-headed stepson and his legal responsibility, the schwartze child. He suddenly had an idea for a film. A bunch of children who were pals, white black, fat thin, rich poor, all kinds, mischievous little urchins who would have funny adventures in their own neighborhood, a society of ragamuffins, like all of us, a gang, getting into trouble and getting out again" (369).



13. Doctorow, "False Documents," 215–32.
14. Interview with Charlie Reilly, "Ragtime, the Novel," *Philadelphia City Paper*, Jan. 1982, 7, 15.
15. Like a piece of music the novel develops certain leitmotifs in counterpoint: the contradiction between technical "discipline" and musical "liberation" or between taylorization and syncopation, between black artistry and white appropriation, between authenticity and commodification (or trivialization).
16. Cf. Craig H. Roell, *The Piano in America, 1890–1940*.
17. There is a creole oral tradition in New Orleans that claims Gottschalk as a "passablanc." Although there is no documentation on his genealogy that would support this assumption, it would explain not only his prolonged exile in France and the Caribbean, but also his musical borrowings from the Afro-Caribbean folk traditions, his problems as a performer in the United States and his firm stand in matters of civil rights. Like Joplin, Gottschalk has only recently been rediscovered.
18. Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988).
19. Adorno's claim that "jazz was particularly suited for fascist purposes" was first made in Parisian exile with fascist Germany looming large: Hektor Rottweiler (alias), "Über Jazz," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* Vol. V (Paris, 1936). Reprinted in Dieter Prokop, ed., *Kritische Kommunikationsforschung. Aufsätze aus der Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (Munich, 1973), 95.
20. Gunther Schuller, *Musings: The Musical Worlds of Gunther Schuller* (New York, 1986), 4. For a demonstration of this difference cf. Jelly Roll Morton's Library of Congress recordings beginning on 21 May 1938 and his conversations with Alan Lomax, *Classic Jazz Masters CJM 2*.
21. See my "Anthropology, Modernism, and Jazz," in Harold Bloom ed., *Ralph Ellison* (New York, 1986), 19–47.
22. A large body of English preindustrial folk songs survived in America, primarily in the Appalachian region. German religious music of the seventeenth century is sung to this day by Hutterites and Mennonites in the United States and Canada. Neither tradition survived the forces of modernization in Europe.
23. One of the stable topics of pre-ragtime popular song culture was motherhood. The songs went to such mother-loving extremes that the market reacted satirically as in the song of 1865 entitled "Mother on the Brain. A Comic Ballad. Dedicated to all writers of Mother Songs." The lyrics run "In the parlor, on the street, or on that battle plain, Ev'rybody seems to have Mother on the brain." The remaining lyrics—ten stanzas in all—are made up of actual song titles of the 1860s on the theme of motherhood or motherly love. Cf. The Harding Collection of American sheet music, The Bodleian Library, Oxford, England.
24. William Bolcom, "Ragtime," *The New Grove: Gospel, Blues and Jazz* (New York, 1986), 23.
25. Isadore Witmark with Isaac Goldberg, *From Ragtime to Swingtime: The Story of the House of Witmark* (New York, 1939). Witmark's coauthor Goldberg was professor of Romance languages at Harvard. On the complex and fascinating relationship between blacks and German Jews in popular music see my "'The Diluted Second Generation': German-Americans in Music, 1870 to 1920," in Hartmut Keil, ed., *German Workers' Culture in the United States 1850 to 1920* (Washington, 1988).
26. Sam Dennison, *Scandalize my Name: Black Imagery in American Popular Music* (New York, 1982), 354.
27. Berndt Ostendorf, "Minstrelsy and Early Jazz," *The Massachusetts Review* 20 (Autumn 1979): 574–603.



28. See Peter Gammond, *Scott Joplin and the Ragtime Era* (London, 1975). Gammond comments, "Wall Street Rag is formally a typical rag of four strains with the difference that Joplin has openly declared his programmatic ideas by adding descriptive headings to each of the movements: 1. Panic in Wall Street, Brokers feeling melancholy; 2. Good times coming; 3. Good times have come; 4. Listening to the strains of genuine negro ragtime, Brokers forget their cares."

29. Gunther Schuller writes: "Through his Clef and Tempo Club leadership, however, he was the first to bring prestige and some degree of professional order to Negro musicians' lives in New York. Moreover, he established his "symphony" orchestras without compromising the essential character of Negro music." "James Reese Europe," *Musings*, 39. See also Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Source Book on Early Black Musical Shows* (Metuchen, N.J., 1980), 362. James Reese Europe was phenomenally successful in Europe during the war, later his was the orchestra of choice for Vernon Castle, the English born dance king of the epoch.

30. Doctorow seems to have some fun here with the Freudian notion that cultural energy depends on the delaying of gratification, or, as the boy muses at one point, "the world composed and recomposed itself in an endless process of dissatisfactions." No wonder the author of *Civilization and its Discontents* calls the new hedonistic mass culture of America a "gigantic mistake."

31. Neil Leonard, "The Reactions to Ragtime," in Hasse, *Ragtime*, 102–13.

32. "Demoralizing Ragtime Music," *Musical Courier* 66 (21 May 1913): 22–23.

33. Quoted in Kenneth Aaron Kanter, *The Jews on Tin Pan Alley* (New York, 1982). See my review in *Popular Music*, vol. 4 (Cambridge, 1984), 323–27. More on the theme of Jewish-Yankee opposition in music is in McDonald Smith Moore, *Yankee Blues: Musical Culture and American Identity* (Bloomington, 1985). See my review in *Popular Music* 6 (Oct. 1987): 358–59. In that context the music of Henry Franklin Belknap Gilbert (1868–1928) is of interest. Gilbert, a classical composer, wrote a number of pieces with a ragtime inflection: "Comedy Overture on Negro Themes" (1905) and "Dance in Place Congo," (1906–1908) which was rejected by Karl Muck as "niggah music" unfit for the concert hall. He then rewrote it as a ballet score with a premiere at the Metropolitan Opera in 1918. By this time the shock of hearing Negro inflections in classical music had worn off, and reviews of his earlier works were quite favorable, but Gilbert withdrew from what he called his "Negro phase." Charles Hamm, *Music in the New World* (New York, 1983), 419–20.

34. Richard Zimmerman, ed., *101 Rare Rags*, published by the editor, 5560 West 62nd Street, Los Angeles, CA 90056, lists four rags by Ford T. Dabney.

35. Quoted in Hasse, *Ragtime*, p. 130. Joplin continues, "it is evident that, by giving each note its proper time and by scrupulously observing the ties, you will get the effect. So many are careless in these respects. Play slowly until you catch the swing, and never play ragtime fast at any time. We wish to say here, that the Joplin ragtime is destroyed by careless or imperfect rendering, and very good players lose the effect entirely, by playing too fast."

36. These generalizations should not be understood as an endorsement of a blacksure-have-timing-school of thought. Cultural behavior including timing is learned: Art Hodes can play the blues and Bill Evans possessed enough timing to satisfy John Coltrane and Miles Davis. The difference is one of access to and mastery of an Afro-American rhythmic sense.

37. Recorded on Deutsche Grammophon No. 2707 083.

38. Liner notes from *Ibid*. The ragtime renaissance did make amends. Schirmer publishers, the most important house in classical music, published a series of books

on ragtime in the 1970s and 1980s. This is belated vindication of Joplin's quest for recognition as a serious composer.

39. The year 1917 marks the end of the novel, and in terms of music, the advent of jazz. The ragtime scholar Edward Berlin reports that today the annual Joplin festival in Sedalia is an all-white affair. "Scott Joplin is white man's music," a black Festival Committee official is supposed to have said. "On Ragtime," *Center for Black Music Research Digest*, 1 (Winter 1988), 4. Ragtime is not the only black-originated music being largely abandoned by black audiences. Joplin's frustration is duplicated by Charles Mingus, Ornette Coleman, and Cecil Taylor in our days.

40. Barbara Foley, "From U.S.A. to Ragtime: Notes on the Forms of Historical Consciousness in Modern Fiction," in Richard Trenner, ed., *E. L. Doctorow: Essays and Conversations* (Princeton, 1983), 167.