

SEDALIA SCOTT JOPLIN FESTIVAL REPORT FOR 2007

Imagine this. Imagine a world without ragtime or traditional jazz. A world devoid of syncopated rhapsodies. A world absent the merry melodies of America's first true indigenous music form. Can you possibly imagine that world?

Not if you were in Sedalia, Missouri this past May/June for the 25th consecutive Scott Joplin International Ragtime Festival. Happily this was a world that was filled with the raucous strains of hard-played ragtime, mellifluous melodies of classic rag compositions, and quite a bit of great music beyond that. I hope to help recapture much of that within this short story, as well as give some behind the scenes looks at the effort it takes to make such a festival appear seamlessly joyful to those who attended and participated. Come with me now to the still-active cradle of ragtime more than a century after its birth.

BEFORE THE MUSIC STARTS

Before we get too far into the present, we need to go back to about three weeks after the previous festival of 2006. This is the period of time when the board of directors for the Scott Joplin Foundation makes their decisions on who will be running things at different levels for the next year's festival based on feedback from the current one. Happily, Musical Director Sue Keller was once again chosen to do the overall organization of the performers themselves and to handle a lot of the logistics. There are many behind the scenes who handle the financing, acquisition, advertising, and year round facets of the event and the always open Scott Joplin store beneath the Bothwell hotel, but Sue and veteran Bill Long represent the face of what the public sees when they attend the annual event. Just the same, they depend on the support of the very active board of directors, many of whom you may already know, and should equally thank for their willingness to be that foundational layer.

Sue actually starts thinking out both who will be chosen for headliners as well as how the different concerts will be themed as early as July, and this past year was no different. She also consults with many of the artists to solicit further ideas, and works with staging them in the different venues. Unlike the past, however, the primary concert venues this year were at the State Fair College for the first day, and downtown at the Liberty Center for the remainder of the performances. This was effective in not only assuring good seating and good capacity, but helped keep down confusion about what would be where when – The fairgrounds? The high school? The drive-in? - It also gave Sue a better known quantity to work with, but still requires a lot of attention to detail.

She then has to contact and engage performers from around the US and the world who can attend this event. As with the board of directors, most of the performers who come are not paid to attend, with the exception of a few headliners and seminar presenters. They, like this author, simply love to play and to share, and that is how we all support this important event. That does not mean that Sue and Bill have a lot of latitude with budget, because it still costs quite a bit to erect tents, rent pianos and sound systems, engage the Liberty Center, and other costs like running the ragtime store. Local vendors

also help out with food donations, printing material discounts, and too many items to enumerate here, but these vendors are mentioned in programs and should be thanked next time you are in town since they too believe in the cause.

Once Sue has the performers, concerts and seminars in place, usually by late October for the contracted ones, Bill Long takes on the process of organizing who will perform in the public venues when, a matrix that goes well beyond setting a baseball league schedule given the number of players. Equity is looked on at multiple levels as well, since dedicated performers and hobbyists with pesky day jobs are all well-represented because they all share the passion necessary to pull this off. Sue and Bill are the glue, but the performers also respect that and do what they can to help enhance the weekend as well. It has been a successful two-way communication since good management makes for happy players.

One other face of the foundation and the board also needs to be noted here before we move into this year's festivities. That would be the imperturbable Stacy Purvis, the only full-time employee of the Scott Joplin Foundation, who runs the business side of the foundation as well as the Scott Joplin Store. This means dealing with shifting inventory, a daunting task the week before the festival starts, making sure publicity is well-handled, dealing directly with the concerns of attendees and to some degree performers, handling a volunteer staff to take care of setup and breakdown and food, and interfacing with local business as well, all with the direct and indirect support of the board. Stacy does this with an ever-present smile on her face and a good sense of humor, although I've never been there about two days after the annual festival is over to see if there is a short-term lapse. I would think after this year's results that any lapse was from exhaustion alone, as Stacy, Sue and Bill helped commandeer one of the most successful Scott Joplin events since the first one was attempted in 1975. On with the show.

WEDNESDAY JUNE 28

This year the festival officially got underway with a 2:00 p.m. concert at the State Fair College Stauffacher Theatre with an attempt to infuse an extra bit of culture into an already cultured music. The theme was rags based on famous classical music, and it almost worked brilliantly, if not altogether seriously. All of the artists had to follow the grand classicist herself, Mimi Blais, who hosted the concert and right out of the box let loose with the awesome *A Musical Massacre* by Willie Eckstein, based on Chopin's *Revolutionary Etude*. Sue Keller ably followed with the real *Fur Elise* by Beethoven, followed by *Peter Gink*, an Edvard Grieg parody by George L. Cobb. Erstwhile ragtime veterinarian Dr. Dave Majchrzak, accompanied by his new friend the screaming operatic monkey, took on the George Schneider parody, *The Furry Lisa*, with aplomb. Bill Edwards (me) tried to play it seriously with his own exercise-based *Hanon Rag*, which was a good warm-up for the *Anvil Chorus* parody *Blacksmith Rag*, the latter which involved some audience participation, and Dr. Dave with a Viking helmet and a trashcan lid anvil. 2007 Old-time Piano Playing Champion Eytan Uslan started with his own stride-like take on Chopin's *Nocturne in Eb Major*, plus variations on *My Old Kentucky Home*. He closed with Berlin's *Mesmerizing Mendelssohn Tune*, his stage singing debut.

Then it was time for the youth. Corie Catherine Melaugh introduced us to the two Felix Arndt *Desecration* parodies, one on instrumental themes and the other on opera. Then up and coming Adam Swanson avoided rushin' through the *Russian Rag*. To close the festivities, historian Nora Hulse with her husband Mark on the banjo took the most basic classical theme, the scale, and ragged it with Edward Claypoole's *Ragging the Scale*, followed by an all hands encore, *The Stars and Stripes Forever*.

Throughout the afternoon at the college cafeteria just outside the auditorium, many other performers such as Dave Tucker, Larisa Migachyov and Marty Mincer, also entertained the crowds with continuous ragtime as crews prepared the downtown venues for the Thursday onslaught of free performances. Many greetings were heard as well at the Best Western as participants arrived and checked in, anticipating an exciting year, and they were not to be disappointed.

The first formal evening concert (meaning one without parodies or screaming operatic monkeys) commenced at the Liberty Center downtown at 8:00 Wednesday evening. Titled *Old and New*, it featured both old and new participants as well as old and new compositions. It was duly opened by Martin Spitznagel who breezed through *The Charleston Rag*, his own prize-winning *Red Elephant Rag* (complete with a red elephant at his side), and Billy Mayerl's athletic *Loose Elbows*. He finished with the first of many duets of the evening with host Sue Keller, *Dill Pickles Rag*. Next up was Mas Ikemiya, the Japanese artist with the New England accent (?), who engaged the audience with a rare Gottschalk piece, *Pasquinade*, from the year of the composer's death, 1869, followed by a bit of *Rhapsody in Blue*, an original syncopation of his own, and a duet of *12th Street Rag* with his wife on the washboard. A hard act to follow, Marty Mincer ably did just that. He introduced a new audience to one of his oldest memories, that of his grandma's fiddle tune, ragged up "ever-so-slightly." A new arrangement of *California, Here I Come* led into Joe Lamb's *Cottontail Rag*, a tour-de-force on Nat Ayer's *Calico Rag*, and the three note rag to end them all, *Black and White Rag*. His duet with Sue was on the energetic *Lion Tamer* by Al Marzian, which since has become a youtube.com favorite.

After a few minutes to recover, noted classical pianist and Sedalia newcomer Richard Dowling immediately engaged the audience with Joseph Northup's *Cannonball*, Joplin's *Original Rags*, and the newer *Rhapsody in Ragtime* by Eubie Blake. He then launched into perhaps the funniest piece of the evening, an atonal rag in the genre that many term "squeakfart" music, which parodied the genre perfectly. It was the *That Old Second-Viennese-School Rag* by Thomas Benjamin, which even if people didn't totally "get it," they still were inspired by his seriocomic interpretation of it. He proceeded to duet with Sue with *Kitten on the Keys*. To close the show, Brian Holland ably presented two newer pieces, Lamb's *Bird Brain Rag* and Frank French's *Belle of Louisville*, followed by the older J.P. Johnson *Snowy Morning Blues* and *Scott Joplin's New Rag*, ending on a duet of Charles Johnson's *Cum Bac Rag*. The capacity crowd was delighted with the entire evening, and then went off to the Best Western to stay up even later and listen to single and dueling pianists in the afterglow room.

THURSDAY MAY 29

This morning was the first of two days of seminars on all kinds of aspects of ragtime and beyond. It should be noted that through Sue Keller's efforts and the support of many in the ragtime community and on the board that the content of both the seminars and some of the performances has branched into many other forms of music related to ragtime, yet still with their own identity. It is also nice to note that the seminars themselves have gone beyond just the music and the composers, bringing new dimensions to the era and new interest as well.

While things were kicking off in the Stark Pavilion and the other outdoor venues, in the Methodist Church a block away, H. Loring White discussed his book *Raggin' It* about ragtime's place in cultural history. Rather than discuss the music, the implications of it within society, as well as the effects it had on culture were the focus, including aspects of race, entertainment, economics, Teddy Roosevelt, and more. It was a broad range of topics to cover in just 55 minutes, but it went over well. That was followed by my own seminar on sheet music covers, how they developed and were used to market the music, the process of creating them, and some biographies of the artists who gave them life. With advanced technologies, so many more possibilities have been introduced in presentation tools that make such topics much easier to convey with animated aids. Next up was Paul Stewart, again covering a wide range of micro-topics directly involved in the music, including Debussy's syncopated compositions, secondary rag figures, the integration of habanera rhythms, the co-evolution of ragtime and dances, and even simple variances in syncopation and what they meant. The last topic of the morning was presented by Butch Thompson, and covered the New Orleans' style of piano playing and many who developed it. In addition to Jelly Roll Morton, he talked about Dink Johnson, Little Brother Montgomery, Steve Lewis, and Tony Jackson, with several demonstrations of their work on the keyboard, ending the morning with Morton's *The Pearls*.

Something introduced recently and gaining in popularity among both festival goers and performers is the Musically Yours segments, which are held at the gazebo on the west side of Ohio Street between second and third. Many favorable comments were passed about this year as a number of performers sat at the upright and played something beyond ragtime, demonstrating not only their versatility and extended passion, but also providing contrast to what they are often better known for. So it was this year for Bryan Wright who played some of his favorite Bix Beiderbecke and Rube Bloom novelties, Mimi Blais with fine classical compositions of her native Canada and beyond, Butch Thompson with his trio going outside of the Jelly Roll Morton spectrum with some boogie woogie, this author working through jazz standards of the 1930s that were an early part of his repertoire, and Brian Holland with a very memorable rendition of Glenn Jenks lovely shanty, *Planxty - Jim Stewart*. Based on the positive reactions, this will probably be a continuing tradition.

Thursday's first formal concert at the Liberty Center, hosted by Iowa historian/performer Brent Watkins, was the annual Cradle of Ragtime, which covers all aspects of Midwest ragtime traditions. Brent played Tom Turpin's pioneering *Harlem Rag*, *Cole Smoak* by

the hard-to-pin-down Clarence H. St John, and Joplin's lovely *Gladiolus Rag*, the 2007 festival theme piece. He was followed by Nan Bostick, great grand-niece of rag composer Charlie Daniels, who gave us *Smoky Topaz* by Grace Bolen, her descendant's famed *Hiawatha*, and the lovely *Peaceful Henry* by Daniel's friend E. Harry Kelly. Bryan Wright took over with the infrequently heard *Ink Splotch Rag* from Clifford Adams, Lamb's well-developed *Cottontail Rag*, and Jelly Roll Morton's take on *Tiger Rag*, which has been regaining popularity as of late. Susan Cordell of Carthage went back to Joplin's beginning with *Original Rags*, the perky *Ham And!* by Arthur Marshall, and *Crazy Blues* by Perry Bradford. The Lake Superior constituents were well-represented by Alex Sandor who closed out the concert with a hoppin' version of Scott's *Frog Legs Rag*, Joplin's flowing *Eugenia*, and an authoritative *Russian Rag*, the Rachmaninoff syncopation by George L. Cobb. The capacity crowd left smiling and humming.

There are so many other performers that appear in the other venues that even though they are not always a part of one of the formal events are still integral to the overall festival, and their efforts are deeply appreciated by the organizers, board, and the attendees who frequent the free venues. One of the more comic endeavors of all the performers of all abilities is trying to outwit the sometimes frequent train traffic out at the Scott Joplin Maple Leaf Club site. In spite of the best efforts of the sound people, the chains of locomotives and their signal horns can wash out two to four minutes of a performance, and they know no rank. But we as a group also appreciate the audiences who come out to that furthest of venues where the building that once housed the Maple Leaf Club stood, and you all seem to laugh along with us. But a nice new venue was put in place last year that ironically embraces trains, yet not their noise. That is the Katy Depot, the station where the Missouri, Kansas and Texas (M-K-T) rail line once stopped in Sedalia. Now a museum, it is also an engaging stop for anybody in town, with fresh entertainment added during the festival.

The Thursday evening concert of duets was hosted by Butch Thompson this year. He introduced Alex Sandor, this time with his dad Tim Sandor and Sandy Williams. Together they fed us *Frigid Frolics* (Alvin Marx), *The Carter Laker* (contemporary composer Gil Lieby), *Bohemia* (Joe Lamb – whose daughter Patricia was in attendance as always), *Frog Legs* once again, and *Great Scott Rag* (by the great Scott). After getting the audience worked up a bit, Jack and Chris Bradshaw kept up the pace with *Cakewalking through Kansas* (contemporary composer Galen Wilkes), *Junk Man Rag* (Luckey Roberts), *Gloria* (a 1923 novelty by Fred Hager) and *Sedalia Stomp* (Galen Wilkes again). Butch and his trio, including Marty Eggers on bass and Hal Smith on drums, gave us a veritable feast of stompn' favorites including *Jelly Roll Blues*, *If I Could Be With You One Hour Tonight*, *Sensation Rag*, *Krooked Blues*, *Maple Leaf Stomp*, *Jungle Blues*, and *At the Jazz Band Ball*. In spite of a rather odd interruption by Dave Majchrzak and his tricycle, just a bit early for his Saturday appearance, all went smoothly.

After an intermission to rest the audience, Susan Cordell emerged with brother Steve Spracklen, revving up *The Smiler* and *Rainbow* (Percy Wenrich), Susan on *Echoes from the Snowball Club* (Harry P. Guy), Steve on *The Pearls* (Morton), and both on *That Teasin' Rag* (Joe Jordan), *House of Lords Rag* (the late Bob Darch), *Cum-Bac* (Charles

Johnson) and a toast with *Champagne Rag* (Lamb). The evening ended with a wonderful and poignant performance by the Tichenor family. (I talked to Trebor recently and he said he didn't feel nearly as bad as some may have thought looked, having been brought out in a wheelchair, saying he was energized by the crowd and that it was a wonderful experience. He has since had a successful hip replacement, and is doing well, hoping to return soon.) Along with his daughter Virginia on drums/piano and her husband Marty Eggers on bass/piano, plus his son Andy on trumpet and his wife Susanna Woodard Tichenor on violin, Trebor held court at the larger of the two pianos as they shifted combinations for a plethora of pleasant performances. Among them was *St. Louis Rag* and *A Ragtime Nightmare* (Tom Turpin), a recreation of the riverboat coming to town with *Mississippi Rag* (William Krell), a dynamic *Creole Belles* (J. Bodewalt Lampe), the lovely *Roberto Clemente* (David Thomas Roberts), *Willie the Weeper* with some astonishingly loud and clear trumpet tones from Andy, closing with a rousing rendition of *Swipesy Cake Walk* (Joplin/Marshall). Everybody left with ears happily ringing.

Each night after the main performances are over, many of the performers and festival goers show up at the Best Western at the south of town for the afterglow. In a fairly large upstairs room there is plenty of seating, a little dance space, and two pianos, this year placed in the middle of the room. Some of the better performances of the festival often happen in this room, such as spur of the moment duets (or trios or more with bass or washboard added), improvisations (this year's big hit being *Super Mario Brothers* in ragtime) and some performers giving their personal best in a more relaxed atmosphere. In a closet in the back often sits radio host and Foundation Lifetime Achievement honoree David Reffkin collecting interviews for another season of shows, and many new friendships are forged as well. Much of this may go largely undocumented, but it is well-remembered by most of the people there, and for those who may have not attended in the past they should give this spontaneous venue some consideration next year.

FRIDAY MAY 30

Friday started with more seminars at the church, and more revelry in the outdoor venues. Opening the morning was Brent Watkins with his talk on "Heroes of Parlor Town," focused largely on Midwest ragtime (he is a historian from Iowa after all) which confronts many of the issues of race as well as perceptions of musicians and composers of that era, clearly his passion. Nan Bostick followed with a focus on The Detroit Publisher, Jerome H. Remick, covering his rise to dominance in ragtime publishing, his methodology, acquisition of talented composers and arrangers as well as buying up struggling firms, and his surge into the 1920s. Local historian Becky Imhauser then took the audience on a tour of Sedalia as it was before, during and after the ragtime era, giving fascinating views of the physical and social evolution of the cradle of ragtime. Gershwin researcher and performer Richard Dowling regaled the crowd with new finds and nuances in the composer's work that were still emerging from his catalog, some existing only as numbered pieces without names, with some fine performed examples as well.

The afternoon concert, Legacy of Scott Joplin, is traditionally focused on the event's namesake. Hosted this year by Northern Virginia pianist Dave Tucker, it included John

Petley, Marty Eggers, Virginia Tichenor and myself (Bill Edwards). There was Dave Majchrzak wandering around once again looking for his concert a day early, but he was quickly steered elsewhere. Featured were the Joplin 1907 pieces, including *Gladiolus Rag*, *Heliotrope Bouquet*, *Rose Leaf Rag*, *Searchlight Rag*, and some additional lovely contributions ranging from *Swipesy* and *Magnetic Rag* to the train wreck of a finale, *The Great Crush Collision March*. Once again the auditorium was near capacity and all were sent out into the afternoon sun with the memory of many *Pleasant Moments*.

Something that has become increasingly popular is the Friday night dance, most recently held in the Smith Cotton High School auditorium. But rather than just have people show up and try to wing it in their wingtips, dance classes are given on Thursday and Friday, plus Saturday after the big dance, as well as a couple of informal Tea Dances hosted by festival entertainers. This year that included the inimitable Jeff Barnhart, Steve Standiford and Jim Radloff, Butch and his trio, Steve Spracklen and John Petley, and Nora Hulse's Turpin Tyme Ragsters, who also provided the backdrop for the formal Friday evening event. As has been the case the past couple of years, the evening event was not only well-attended, but well-groomed as well, since many of the participants also wore their most elegant old-time dance outfits. The event opens with a great grand promenade led by instructors Rod and Tricia Biensen (who met at this event and have since become the number one couple of ragtime dance) to the strains of *Antoinette* and *The Rosebud March*. There were very few people sitting this one out.

SATURDAY JUNE 1

Somehow, after another night of revelry into the wee hours, a large crowd gathered for the 9:00 a.m. Fashion Contest out at the Maple Leaf Pavilion. Well-dressed and elegant human mannequins of all ages were present, and those who missed that show missed some of the best humor of the whole weekend as dished out by those from 9 to 90. It was followed by the parade to downtown, which now has moved to Saturday morning, and includes some beautiful old cars, the beautiful and handsome fashion models from the show, and some of the, well, um, rag-tag-raggers as well. Even without confetti and giant balloons of Dill Pickles and Super-Joplin, it was a lovely trek down to the Stark Pavilion. The entire entourage then descended into the tent for the awards for the fashion show and a speech from the mayor himself, as well as other dignitaries. Then the music commenced once again building up through the afternoon to a feverish pitch as host Larry Lyles kept the surprises coming.

Sue Keller certainly had her hands full with no less than seven formal concerts, all of which required some themed focus and the management of a lot of performers. It should be noted, albeit my observation and opinion, that there are fortunately few prima donnas in ragtime, at least I don't recall having met them, which makes Sue's job easier and the backstage (actually under-stage) atmosphere more like a happy party than anything else. So it was for the Ragtime Revelations concert. Don Ryan started out with fine performances of Gershwin's *Rialto Ripples*, Lamb's *American Beauty*, and French's *Belle of Louisville*. Dale Hadley gave of two his own contemporary rags, *That Blossom Rag* and *Plaintive Rag*. Then Richard Dowling slowed things down with a classically-

tinged *Bethena*, a reading of Bolcom's *Graceful Ghost* which brought on soothed ears and many tears for its stunning beauty, plus a dynamic romp through Felix Arndt's *Nola*. Teen marvel Adam Swanson started out with a broadly varied take on Blake's *I'm Just Wild About Harry*, followed by his own *Novice Novelty* and the nearly impossible *Space Shuffle* by Robin Frost. Then Brett Youens, who had been sidelined in 2006 by a broken wrist, proved his dedication to recovery with *Billy Goat*, his own *Carolina Rose*, and *Second Hand Shoes*. Things were going all right until the misguided veterinarian wandered out again, insistently pointed in the direction of evening, finally letting the show continue. Jeff Barnhart stormed the stage with *Spontaneous Syncopations*, composed on the spot much to the delight of all assembled (perhaps even to Jeff), followed by *Summer Garden* and *Anita*, recent favorites of his. Then Too Many Notes (too many well-known female pianists to even count) closed with the lady-composed pieces *Hoosier Rag*, *Gravel Rag*, *Margery* and *Chicken Chowder*. Bravo to the Sues, Susans and Nans, etc., and all that hung around for that last bit.

The foundation arranges for many fine meals each night of the event, ranging from the Friday Fish Fry to a delightful barbeque. Much of the food is provided by local merchants who gladly support this event. However, for many of the performers, some of the eating establishments around town also feed them at a discount, or better, simply in exchange for a few tunes to entertain their patrons. This gesture managed to facilitate a number of impromptu parties, cutting sessions, and all manner of culinary accompaniment this past year, and it should be noted that each of the poor underfed starving ragtime pianists who benefited from this practice was very grateful to each of these establishments. Most of the eating venues both within the festival and around town are fairly well-attended, so there is thankfully enough of us to go around for all of them. The gang I was with one night agreed that free steak always tastes better, especially with Joplin, Morton and Gershwin in the foreground.

The Music Hall Concert is the one that seems to get harder to plan each year, because the last one is more outrageous and entertaining than the one before it, making it difficult to top. Sue and the gang still managed to plus this spectacular event this year, and some of the concert even grew itself backstage as it was unfolding onstage. For Dr. Dave Majchrzak, who had obviously been looking forward to the thing since Wednesday, he was finally able to get on stage and not be chased off. Not often at least. The theme was "I Wont' Grow Up" aimed at all manner of kids, and it delighted a sold-out crowd to no end. Sue and Dave, dressed as little children, did an extended rendition of that very song from Peter Pan, complete with lovely temper tantrums, teddy bears, screaming operatic monkeys, and more. Also "kidding around" were Jeff Barnhart and Brian Holland, plus that big French Canadian kid Mimi, who delighted us with *Music Box Rag* on her "extremely heavy" toy grand piano hauled out by the stocky pair of stage hands. A moment of sheer enchantment was provided by Sue with a solo on the song *Neverland*. The "boys in the chorus" made an appearance for around 30 seconds that left people scratching their heads, but then again, anything could and did happen. The cleverest segment of the first half was the moonwalking single-gloved duo of Rich Berry and Don Ryan who came out amidst fog and similarly gloved monsters to the strains of *Thriller*, and proceeded to duet on – you guessed it – *The Thriller*. After a few minutes of needed

rest for the audience, Jeff and Brian went at it for a few minutes, working up a feverish pitch to a tantalizing duet of *That's A Plenty* with many challenges thrown by the bald one that were all well-met by the hairy one. They then proceed to the balcony for the rest of the show to put on their best Statler and Waldorf Muppet impression, taunting other performers as they left the stage, or simply sleeping noisily. Joining the line of pianists reprising from the first half was John Petley with some fine folk material. Nora and the Turpin Tyme Ragsters came out for the final set, and were joined on stage by some of the backstage crew (including myself) on whatever we could grab for a grand finale of *Dill Pickles Rag*. Nobody wanted to leave, but the cast managed to chase them outside eventually, many departing for the Best Western for more revelry deep into the night.

For those of you who attended the 2007 event, we truly hope this synopsis brought back pleasant memories of what went on, if not outright chapters of it in vivid detail. For those who were not able to make it, or perhaps missed some of the formal concerts, we invite you back in June of 2008 for yet another outstanding year in the Cradle of Ragtime, promising more of the same and even some new surprises here and there. In the end, it is not just the players who make the event successful. Those who come and support and encourage us to continue play a very big role as well, so we encourage you right back. Plus Sue has something cooking already that... well, you'll just have to wait and see.

SYNCere thanks, Bill Edwards