

# Traces of Ragtime: An Analytical Survey

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It is common knowledge that the blues was one of the major components of jazz from the beginning. However, ragtime was the other major component, though its contribution is less appreciated. Increasing our understanding of the origins of jazz and the contributions of early jazz artists requires detailed study of all aspects of the relevant context. This paper endeavors to illuminate an important area of the historical and musical context by identifying and analyzing the formal elements of early jazz performances, thereby uncovering the extent to which ragtime contributed to the creation of jazz. Perceiving the influence of earlier styles helps us to appreciate the richness of jazz and acknowledge its true place in the panoply of American musical traditions.

Ragtime was popular during the years 1893 to 1919, and was characterized by formal elements inherited from march and polka traditions.<sup>1</sup> Originally a solo piano music, ragtime later manifested in songs, ensemble arrangements, and culminated in an opera written by the greatest ragtime artist, Scott Joplin. Ragtime began as an improvisational music, but there is no tangible evidence of this practice; ragtime is apprehended today in written and recorded forms.<sup>2</sup> The Original Dixieland Jazz Band made what are generally agreed to be the first jazz recordings in 1917; oral histories suggest that an early form of jazz may have been practiced around 1900, although no notated or recorded evidence of such music exists.<sup>3</sup> It is clear, however, that the decline

of ragtime and the emergence of jazz overlapped during the 1910s, and that jazz arose from the ragtime music milieu.

References to the role of ragtime are frequently encountered in jazz literature, but often are anecdotal rather than analytical. Consequently, there is some disagreement and confusion among sources regarding the transitional processes contributing to the formation of jazz. This research will shed light on this area by analyzing and comparing the structures of early jazz recorded performances with typical published ragtime compositions by major composers. (Although they are different in type, published and recorded sources can justifiably be compared in this context. Published ragtime works were regarded as definitive representations of the style; jazz emerged concurrently with the birth of sound recording technology, and thus its definitive style is considered to be represented in these recordings of live performances with improvisation.) This paper will conclude with an evaluation of the ragtime structures and transitional hybrid forms employed in early jazz recordings.

Representative works by major ragtime and early jazz artists were selected for analysis. Works composed between 1897 and 1914 by Tom Turpin, Scott Joplin, and Hubert 'Eubie' Blake exemplify the classic notated ragtime style; recordings made between 1917 and 1925 by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, Edward 'Kid' Ory, King Oliver, Bennie Moten, Clarence Williams, and Jelly Roll Morton represent a cross-section of work produced by pioneers of early jazz. Morton is the towering figure among the early jazz artists, and as such there already exists a great deal of writing on his life and music (see Jasen, Williams, Lomax et. al.). This research will place him in context with other important jazz artists of the period.

## RAGTIME

Ragtime is typified by multi-thematic form based on earlier dance music styles comprising three or more 16-measure strains, usually including a contrasting trio or C strain modulating to the dominant or subdominant key. Within this format there are two major variants, the linear and rounded rag forms. Linear rags are characterized by chaining of sections, while the rounded rag ‘rounds off’ the form by reprising the first section at the end. The great composers of ragtime created a body of distinctive work using these models.

Tom Turpin wrote the earliest published rag by an African-American composer in 1897. He employed a rounded rag form in *Harlem Rag* (example 1). The B section utilizes a circle-of-fifths pattern; the C section or trio modulates to the dominant key, and the final A returns with the original tonic C.

The *Maple Leaf Rag*, written by Scott Joplin in 1899, became the most popular published ragtime composition and strongly represents the style. Joplin employed a linear rag form in this composition (example 2). In this instance the trio modulates to the subdominant, and the closing D section returns to the original tonic key, Ab. The composer also begins the B and C strains with a dominant seventh chord, creating contrast with the opening strain.

Two later compositions published in 1914 by Joplin and Turpin expand upon these models (examples 3 and 4). In *Magnetic Rag*, Joplin creates an expansive rounded rag by extending the trio to 48 measures from the typical 32 and introduces key relations not common in ragtime (relative and parallel minor keys in juxtaposition). The trio strain, with flatted thirds and I-IV-I-V-I chord progression, suggests a blues comprised of

14- and 10- measure phrases. In *Panama Rag*, Turpin varies the rounded rag model, modulating to the subdominant in the second strain, modulating again in the third, and reprising the B rather than the A at the end. These examples demonstrate the defining details as well as the flexibility of ragtime form in the hands of creative composers.

Two early works by Hubert ‘Eubie’ Blake, *Charleston Rag* and *Brittwood Rag* exhibit creative use of ragtime models (examples 5 and 6). Both Blake and Turpin employ three strains in each of these compositions, whereas Joplin used four.<sup>4</sup> *Brittwood Rag* mirrors the form of *Harlem Rag* and deploys a similar cycle-of-fifths pattern in the B strain. *Charleston Rag* is a compressed linear rag with a varied key plan, moving from minor to relative major and back, concluding with a trio-like strain in the subdominant of the relative major key. Significant general features of ragtime style include 3- or 4-strain rounded or linear multi-thematic form; contrasting cycle-of-fifths harmonic progression or dominant seventh initiation; and trio-section modulation to the subdominant key.

## **ORIGINAL DIXIELAND JAZZ BAND**

The Original Dixieland Jazz Band (O.D.J.B.) made their first groundbreaking recordings in 1917: the texture, excitement, and improvisatory feel of the music suggest jazz, but many of the structures can be clearly linked to ragtime. *Dixieland Jass Band One-Step* is a linear ABABCCCC structure, with the A strains in Bb, the B strains modulating to Eb, and the C strains moving to Ab. The C strains allow for improvisation over a repeating harmonic phrase, functioning as a stretto-like coda also known as the ‘stomp’ section. *Fidgety Feet* follows a similar pattern in simplified form: ABCCC design sharing the same key plan. *At the Jazz Band Ball* is an ABAB binary form

alternating G minor and the relative major B $\flat$ ; the B strain begins on a dominant chord and initiates a cycle-of-fifths progression. *Skeleton Jangle* mirrors this form without modulation. The O.D.J.B. uses ragtime multi-strain forms or employs ragtime features in comparatively simpler forms.

*Tiger Rag* features four strains in as many keys and resembles the key plan and extended stomp section employed in *Dixieland Jass Band One-Step*. *Tiger Rag* is a linear rag form: ABACDDDD, with each strain in a different key. The C strain (trio) is in the subdominant (E $\flat$ ) and the D strain modulates by another fourth to A $\flat$ . The B strain departs from the ragtime model, modulating to the dominant key (F) and comprising only 8 measures duration instead of the usual 16. *Sensation Rag* exhibits a complex multi-strain form combining linear and rounded rag elements: the strains are deployed AABBCCBABCB, with the A strains in B $\flat$ , the B strains progressing through a cycle of fifths from C to E $\flat$ , and the C strains in A $\flat$ . (The O.D.J.B. often made use of modulation to distinguish sections in their multi-strain compositions. Beyond the typical modulation to the subdominant, additional modulations are not characteristic of ragtime nor are they unusual.)

### **KID ORY AND HIS CREOLE JAZZ BAND (SPIKE'S SEVEN PODS OF PEPPER)**

*Ory's Creole Trombone*, recorded by Edward 'Kid' Ory in 1922, is another example of creative reworking of ragtime elements. Linear and rounded rag principles are combined resulting in a multi-strain form ABBCDCDC; the C strain modulates to the

subdominant in typical ragtime style, followed by a D strain featuring a characteristic cycle of fifths progression beginning on Ab and leading to an F7 chord re-establishing the subdominant. The composer reprises and extends the C strain, repeats the D and C strains and closes with a coda confirming the subdominant key.

*Society Blues*, also recorded in 1922, is a unique hybrid composed of blues choruses functioning as strains in a shortened multi-thematic form. Beginning with two 12-bar blues choruses in F, Ory moves on to a repeated contrasting B strain in the same key constructed as a 13-measure blues. This is followed by an abrupt modulation to G major (C strain) for a ‘stomp’ section comprising four 12-measure blues choruses.

### **KING OLIVER’S CREOLE JAZZ BAND**

King Oliver made the first recordings that are undoubtedly jazz: blues and improvisation are integrated into a coherent style, while ragtime is present in the structure even as a new rhythmic swing is manifest. Oliver’s band was the first all-star jazz ensemble featuring Johnny Dodds, Lil Hardin (later Armstrong), Baby Dodds, Honore Dutrey, and not least, Louis Armstrong.

Four of the tunes analyzed are clearly rag forms; a fifth, *Alligator Hop*, is a binary form that employs the characteristic ragtime modulation to the subdominant in the alternate B sections. *Froggie Moore*, also known as *Froggie Moore Rag* (composed by Jelly Roll Morton) and *Weather Bird Rag* share a similar ABAC format, and each initiates the B strain on a dominant chord in typical ragtime form. *Weather Bird Rag* remains in Ab throughout, while *Froggie Moore* follows ragtime tradition and modulates to the subdominant for the C strain. *Snake Rag*, composed by Oliver, follows a similar

ABAC pattern: the final strain modulates to the subdominant and the B strain begins with a dominant chord. Oliver departs from the model in this instance by extending the A strain to 24 measures. Oliver adopts the extended stomp section pioneered by O.D.J.B. in a number of tunes, especially *Snake Rag*, while *Froggie Moore* maintains a symmetrical 32-measures-per-strain format. *High Society Rag* is clearly in ragtime form, evidenced by multi-strain construction (AA<sup>1</sup>BCB) and the characteristic modulation to the subdominant in the B strain. For contrast, the C strain features a brief 16-measure modulation to C minor (the relative minor of the subdominant) similar to that heard in Ory's *Clarinet Marmalade Blues*.

## **JELLY ROLL MORTON**

Jelly Roll Morton is the classicist of the early jazz pioneers: working within the established ragtime forms while focusing his compositional and improvisational creativity on melodic and harmonic variation.<sup>5</sup> For example, Morton's first published composition, *Jelly Roll Blues* (1915), features 12-bar blues choruses with written variations. All of the non-blues pieces analyzed from the 1923-24 solo recordings are clear ragtime forms: *Perfect Rag*, *The Pearls*, *Wolverine Blues*, *King Porter*, *Grandpa's Spells*, *Kansas City Stomps*, and *Shreveport Stomps*. Each of these employs classic ragtime features including modulation to the subdominant, initiation of the B strain by a dominant harmony, and multi-strain linear or rounded designs.

In his early recordings Morton was disinclined to employ hybrid or truncated forms. Instead, he typically created jazz within the ragtime structures by treating the repeated strains as opportunities for melodic improvisation or reharmonization. *Jelly Roll*

*Blues* is a variant of his typical approach wherein Morton organizes the blues into a rag-like structure: two choruses in Bb corresponding to the A strain with contrasting stop-time choruses functioning as a B strain, concluding with a characteristic modulation to Eb for the trio choruses.

## CLARENCE WILLIAMS

Clarence Williams began performing and publishing compositions during the transitional period of the 1910s, and the influence of ragtime and blues is evident in his first jazz records made in the 1920s. He recorded and performed with many blues artists in the early 1920s and began recording jazz in 1923. Williams is remembered for his compositions and for his small-group studio sessions featuring great jazz artists including Sidney Bechet, Louis Armstrong, Bubber Miley, and Don Redman.

Clarence Williams' first instrumental jazz recording session took place in July 1923 and reflects his influences. *Kansas City Man Blues* is a soulful, down-tempo instrumental blues featuring Sidney Bechet's expressive improvisation. On the other hand, the second tune from the session, *Wild Cat Blues*, is not a blues at all but instead a formally constructed linear rag. Comprising four strains arrayed ABACDCDC, *Wild Cat Blues* modulates in classic rag fashion to the subdominant for the C strain and alternates with its relative key (D minor) in the D strains.

Williams continued to record vocal and instrumental blues music throughout the 1920s but moved away from strict ragtime forms. However, he did continue to employ ragtime elements in compositions. For example, in 1924 and 1925 he recorded *Early In The Morning* and *Who'll Shop Your Suey When I'm Gone*. Each contains a contrasting



rag-style B section featuring a cycle-of-fifths progression beginning with a secondary dominant (V7 of II in the former, V7 of VI in the latter instance).

### **BENNIE MOTEN**

Bennie Moten made his first recordings a little over a year after King Oliver's groundbreaking releases, leading an influential band in Kansas City during the 1920s which later formed the core of the Count Basie band in the early 1930s. Most of Moten's early recordings were straightforward blues or song-forms, but ragtime influences are evident. For example, *South* is composed of only two strains, arranged ABBBBBA, but each segment is of 16 measures duration and the B strain begins on a dominant seventh chord in the ragtime style. *Goofy Dust* has three strains arranged AAABB[transition]CA. The piece remains in one key, but the contrasting B section begins on a G dominant seventh chord and progresses through a cycle of fifths resolving to the tonic Bb, echoing the characteristic ragtime B strain function. Moten rarely employed forms with more than two strains, though he did employ ragtime devices in this context.

### **FINDINGS**

Ragtime echoes through jazz in the ubiquitous 'rhythm bridge' of the swing and bop era. George Gershwin created contrast in *I Got Rhythm* (1930) as the ragtime and early jazz musicians did, with a bridge beginning on the V7 of VI and continuing through a cycle of fifths (albeit within an AABA form). Tunes based on this progression such as *Sweet Georgia Brown* are clearly descended from the typical ragtime B-strain format.

Another common manifestation of ragtime influence is the modulation to the subdominant, often preceded by a strong secondary dominant statement (V7 of IV) as exemplified by the bridge sections of early jazz era compositions such as *Honeysuckle Rose*, *Just You, Just Me*, and *Squeeze Me*.

Various examples of hybrid forms, described as “bluesy rags and raggy blues” by Edward A. Berlin in Ragtime,<sup>6</sup> are found in the work of early jazz artists. *Lazy Daddy* (The O.D.J.B.) and *Sobbin’ Blues* (King Oliver) employ 16- measure strains characterized by blues harmonic progression within a rag-like multi-strain format. Alternatively, *Mournin’ Blues* (The O.D.J.B.) and *Working Man Blues* (King Oliver) combine 16- measure strains and 12- measure blues choruses in multi-sectional forms similar to W.C. Handy’s *St. Louis Blues*. Kid Ory’s *Society Blues*, discussed earlier in the paper, deploys blues choruses as strains in a compressed rag-like multi-strain form. Louis Armstrong created an elaborate version of this format in *Yes, I’m In the Barrel*: rag-like form with three strains; A and B strains alternating 16- and 20- measures duration; contrasting C-strain comprising two 12-measure solo blues choruses. *Clarinet Marmalade Blues* (O.D.J.B.) exemplifies a ‘bluesy-rag’ hybrid: ragtime influence is manifest in the multi-strain form featuring 16-measure A and B strains followed by a contrasting 12-measure C strain, while the A strain is characterized by a 16-bar blues harmonic progression.

## CONCLUSION

As jazz overtook ragtime in popularity during the early 1920s, musicians continued to employ ragtime structures to support their experiments in improvisation and

swing. King Oliver, Kid Ory, Clarence Williams, Bennie Moten, and Louis Armstrong utilized ragtime devices with different degrees of flexibility, while Morton created distinctive work based on the forms established twenty years before. Analysis shows that ragtime maintained an identifiable presence in jazz at least until 1924, and formal elements are traceable well beyond. Undoubtedly, the blues resonates more strongly throughout jazz to this day, but ragtime played an important role providing structure for the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic designs of the early jazz pioneers.

John P. Murphy, writing in *The Black Perspective in Music*, argues for a more holistic study of jazz, asserting “creativity...is not based on a concept of complete originality but on repetitional variation, where meaning depends as much on the transformation of existing material as it does on originality.”<sup>7</sup> Recognizing the influence of ragtime need not undermine appreciation of the achievements and originality of early jazz artists. Murphy suggests that transformation is as meaningful as originality in jazz, and embracing the broader context leads to enhanced understanding of the music and its creators. Jazz is an American art form that emerged from the manifestly American streams of blues and ragtime.

## NOTES

1. Reid Badger, *A Life in Ragtime: A Biography of James Reese Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 9.
2. Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1983), 316.
3. Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 36.
4. Kansas City composers primarily used the 4-theme rag form: “composers elsewhere seldom used more than three themes.” David A. Jasen and Gene Jones, *Black Bottom Stomp: Eight Masters of Ragtime and Early Jazz* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 4.
5. Martin Williams, *Jelly Roll Morton* (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1962), 35.
6. Edward A. Berlin, *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 160.
7. John P. Murphy, “Jazz Improvisation: The Joy of Influence,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 18 (1990): 9.

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Moten, Bennie. *Bennie Moten’s Kansas City Orchestra: 1923-1927*. Classics 549, 1990. “South” and “Goofy Dust” recorded November 29, 1924. Bennie Moten (piano), Lammar Wright, Harry Cooper (cornet), Thamon Hayes (trombone), Woody Walder, Harlan Leonard (clarinet), Sam Tall (banjo), Willie Hall (drums).

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(trombone), Sidney Bechet (soprano saxophone), Clarence Williams (piano), Buddy Christian (banjo), Margaret Johnson (vocal).

**EXAMPLES**

**Example 1**, diagram of *Harlem Rag* form (Tom Turpin, 1897)

A 16m. 16m. (C)

[:**B** 16 m. 16m.(E7>G7):]

[:**B2** 16m. 16m. (E7>G7):]

[:**C** 16m.16m.(G):]

A 16m. 16m. (C)

**Example 2**, diagram of *Maple Leaf Rag* form (Scott Joplin, 1899)

A 16 m. 16m. (Ab)

B 16m. 16m. (Eb7>)

A 16m. (Ab)

C 16m. 16m. (Ab7>Db)

D 16m. 16m. (Db>Ab)

**Example 3**, diagram of *Magnetic Rag* form (Scott Joplin, 1914)

4m. Intro/ A 16m. 16m. (Bb/Bb>D7)

B 16m. 16m. (G minor/G minor>F7)

C 24m. 24m. (Bb) /2m. transition/

D 16m. 16m. (Bb minor)

A **16m.** (Eb) 16m. 16m. (Bb) /8m. coda

**Example 4**, diagram of *Panama Rag* form (Tom Turpin, 1914)

8m. intro/ [:A 16m. 16m. (G):]

/8m. transition/ [:B 16m. 16m. (C):]

[:C 16m. 16m. (C7>F):]

**B** 16m 16m. (C)

**Example 5**, diagram of *Charleston Rag* form (H. Blake, 1899)

8m. intro/ A 16m. 16m. (Bb minor)

**B** 16m. 16m. (Db)

A 16m. (Bb minor)

4m. transition/ C 16m. 16m. (Gb)

**Example 6**, diagram of *Brittwood Rag* form (H. Blake, 1907)

4m. intro/ A 16m. (Eb)

**B** 16m. 16m. (C7>Eb)

**C** 16m. 16m. (Ab)

4m. transition (Bb7>) A 16m. (Eb)