



# King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era

By Edward A. Berlin

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In 1974, the academy award-winning film *The Sting* brought back the music of Scott Joplin, a black ragtime composer who died in 1917. Led by *The Entertainer*, one of the most popular pieces of the mid-1970s, a revival of his music resulted in events unprecedented in American musical history. Never before had any composer's music been so acclaimed by both the popular and classical music worlds. While reaching a "Top Ten" position in the pop charts, Joplin's music was also being performed in classical recitals and setting new heights for sales of classical records. His opera *Treemonisha* was performed both in opera houses and on Broadway.

Destined to be the definitive work on the man and his music, *King of Ragtime* is written by Edward A. Berlin. A renowned authority on Joplin and the author of the acclaimed and widely cited *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History*, Berlin redefines the Scott Joplin biography. Using the tools of a trained musicologist, he has uncovered a vast amount of new information about Joplin. His biography truly documents the story of the composer, replacing the myths and unsupported anecdotes of previous histories. He shows how Joplin's opera *Treemonisha* was a tribute to the woman he loved, a woman other biographers never even mentioned. Berlin also reveals that Joplin was an associate of Irving Berlin, and that he accused Berlin of stealing his music to compose *Alexander's Ragtime Band* in 1911.

Berlin paints a vivid picture of the ragtime years, placing Scott Joplin's story in its historical context. The composer emerges as a representative of the first post-Civil War generation of African Americans, of the men and women who found in the world of entertainment a way out of poverty and lowly social status. *King of Ragtime* recreates the excitement of these pioneers, who dreamed of greatness as they sought to expand the limits society placed upon their race.

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## King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era By Edward A. Berlin Bibliography

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## **Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

Although he did not invent ragtime, Joplin (1868-1917) is the best-known exponent of this type of jazz, with its characteristic syncopated rhythms. Berlin (*Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History*) shows how Joplin launched his career in the black social clubs of Sedalia, Mo.; achieved success with the Maple Leaf Rag; and went on to win the respect of whites as well as his fellow African Americans, composing numerous rags and two operas, *A Guest of Honor* (now lost) and *Treemonisha*. Joplin, whose father was born into slavery, aspired to transcend his humble origins, but because details of his personal history are elusive, Berlin's conclusions about Joplin's often unhappy life and personal relationships tend to be speculative. The author lands on solid ground, however, with his analysis of Joplin's sophisticated and innovative compositions, demonstrating clearly how he expanded the language of ragtime. In the final chapter, Berlin brings the story full circle with a comprehensive summary of the fate of ragtime from its eclipse in the 1920s and 1930s to its comeback in the 1940s and the revival of Joplin's work still going on today. Photos not seen by PW.

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From Library Journal

Joplin knew he had a distinctive talent and so did several well-placed contemporaries, yet he never realized widespread acclaim during his lifetime (1868-1917). If he were alive today he could revel in the unique ways his music has placed him at the top: concert artists' repertoire; film music; an annual festival; even a postage stamp. Still, information on Joplin has been sparse. Here Berlin (author of *Ragtime: A Musical and Cultural History*, LJ 3/1/80) helps by examining dates and events that are in question. Berlin provides two interesting features: a detailed listing of music published and copyrighted by Joplin during his lifetime and the music and text of three songs arranged by Joplin that were left out of NYPL's definitive *The Complete Works of Scott Joplin* (1981). Readers will want to compare Berlin's book with Susan Curtis's *Dancing to a Black Man's Tune: A Life of Scott Joplin* (LJ 4/15/94). Recommended for American music collections.

*Kathleen Sparkman, Baylor Univ., Waco, Tex.*

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From [Booklist](#)

Berlin, an expert on the world of ragtime whose two previous books on it are standards, proffers a splendid new study of the acknowledged king of the music, a life-and-works that exhaustively details the particulars of Joplin's biography. Berlin places the composer squarely in context, from his childhood in Texarkana, and his life in Sedalia (Missouri) and St. Louis, through his troubled last years in New York, during which he attempted, without success, to stage his grand opera, *Treemonisha*. Berlin is enabled in his task by newly discovered documentation that allows him to replace with reliable facts the myths and unsupported anecdotes previously used in the composer's biography. Among the discoveries are the true identity of the titular heroine of Joplin's operaa woman Joplin loved and lost to deathand the revelation that Joplin collaborated with Irving Berlin: Joplin apparently believed Berlin's hit *Alexander's Ragtime Band* was based on materials plagiarized from his work. Essential in any library concerned with American music. *John Shreffler*

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**From reader reviews:**

**Katie Martinez:**

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