

CREATAHOLIC

**SOURCES AND
RESOURCES OF
CLASSIC RAGTIME MUSIC
A CRITICAL READING**



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Sources and Resources of Classic Ragtime Music – A Critical Reading

Floyd and Reisser set out on a task to further evaluate existing canonical assumptions about the origins of classic ragtime music leading them to African, Latin American and European sources. Utilizing a wide variety of materials from a diverse range of disciplines, such as psychology, musicology, ethnomusicology, and incorporating examples from an array of musical genres including classical, jazz and religious works, they attempt to develop a new theory of the origins of classic ragtime music that is based on John Storm Roberts' book, *Black Music of Two Worlds*. Their final conclusion states that:

The structural characteristics, the harmony, the chromaticism, the major mode, and the lyricism of classic ragtime are all European-derived. Its additive rhythms, rhythmic polarity, its short-phrase melodic constructions, and pentatonic tendencies come from Africa.¹

Unlike Edward Berlin's entry in Oxford's *New Grove Music*, they maintain a healthy distance from the standard writings on ragtime by Jasen, Blesh & Janis, Bolcom, and Waldo, which leads me to believe that their research may be new and fresh, and not just a regurgitation of canonical works. In addition, there has been a trend in ragtime research to copy existing theories on origins, which can increase the likelihood of duplicating inaccurate or erroneous assumptions.

¹ Floyd, Jr., Samuel A. and Marsha J. Reisser. "The Sources and Resources of Classic Ragtime Music" *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 4 (1984):p51.

In order to fully evaluate the ideas found in this article, it is important to understand the most established opinions about the origins of ragtime, which may be found in several books from the 1970s and include:

- Blesh, Rudy & Harriet Janis. *They all Played Ragtime – The True Story of an American Music*. New York: Grove Press Inc., 1950, Rev 4/1971.
- Waldo, Terry. *This is Ragtime*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1976.
- Schafer, William J. and Johannes Riedel. *The Art of Ragtime*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1973.

Rudy Blesh and Harriet Janis focus on Negro folk melodies and “syncopations of the plantation banjos”² in order to explain the origins of ragtime. They discuss the treatment of rhythm as stemming from “African rhythmic principles” and they include coon songs among the influences on ragtime, commenting that “ragtime rhythms characterize all Negro singing and pervade the topical songs”.³

Terry Waldo maintains that:

although syncopation is essentially of African origin, its combination with the European musical system accounts for the essential uniqueness of ragtime. This was the first significant musical innovation to evolve from the cultural interchange brought about by slavery in the United states. And so ragtime is, at least in its inception, Afro-American music.⁴

He also makes reference to the pentatonic scale system which he says is “more prevalent in African music” even though he clearly states that the music is “based on the traditional European major and minor scales”.⁵

Schafer & Riedel describe ragtime as “a formation, an organization of folk melodies and musical techniques into a brief and fairly simple quadrille-like structure,

² Blesh, Rudy & Harriet Janis. They all played ragtime – The True Story of an American Music. New York: Grove Press Inc., 1950, Rev 4/1971: p7.

³ Ibid: p8.

⁴ Waldo, Terry. This is Ragtime. New York: Da Capo Press, 1976: p5.

⁵ Ibid:p5.

written down and designed to be played *as written* on the piano” and that it is “based on black dance music”.⁶

Three specific references are cited quite frequently in Lloyd and Reisser’s article. The first, Edward Berlin’s entry on “Ragtime” in Oxford Music Online, is more recent than the aforementioned, but his bibliography is limited to many of his own articles, in addition to those listed above which may lead to perpetuation of imprecise or historically inaccurate ideas. Berlin lists several possible sources of ragtime music, including, the march, two-step, fox-trot, polka, schottische and cakewalk. In addition, he makes reference to “habanera- or tango-like syncopations”, as does Floyd and Reisser.

The second, Len Lyons book, *The 101 Best Jazz Albums – A History of Jazz on Records*, describes ragtime as developing from marching bands which originated in the antebellum period, the cakewalk, banjo music, coon songs, French quadrilles, schottisches, and polkas⁷. These are the same stylistic sources described by Edward Berlin.

The third book, *Black Music of Two Worlds* by John Storm Roberts, was originally published in 1972 and revised in 1998. Roberts’ book includes music from African, Caribbean, Latin, and African-American Traditions which allows for a greater scope of historical knowledge, therefore creating an environment for the possible dissipation of long-held assumptions about the origins of ragtime. He describes the development of

⁶ Schafer, William J. and Johannes Riedel. *The Art of Ragtime*. Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1973: p5-6.

⁷ Lyons, Len. *The 101 Best Jazz Albums – A History of Jazz on Records*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1980: p33-35.

ragtime music by presenting two views which he says have been largely “overstated”⁸. The first, is that ragtime was a “straight transfer of “African” plantation banjo patterns to the piano”, and the second, that the “African components were the weakest and most etiolated” further remarking that the composers of ragtime “were well aware of “European” musical features”⁹. Roberts refers to the formal structure of rags as “extremely European and quite un-African” and also links ragtime to March forms derived from Brazilian and Cuban musics, therefore shifting the focus of ragtime origins from Africa and Europe. He also connects ragtime to cakewalk and banjo music, but instead emphasizes Latin and Caribbean influences such as the Cuban *danza habanera* and the Caribbean *danzas*.

Syncretism is discussed within this article as an aspect of the origins of ragtime and is used to “explain the merging of musical traits from two different cultures and the combining of these into new musical forms”¹⁰. Syncretism is defined as “the attempt to reconcile disparate or contrary beliefs, often while melding practices of various schools of thought.”¹¹ Floyd and Reisser maintain the African origins of ragtime, but like Roberts, they introduce an additional stepping stone, Latin America, encompassing a wider view of rhythmic origins and characteristics of ragtime, denying much of the existing scholarship and research. Unfortunately, they only touch upon the Latin American influences and rarely maintain the argument in sufficient detail.

⁸ Roberts, John Storm. *Black Music of Two Worlds*. New York: Schener Books, 1972, Rev 2/1988:p217.

⁹ *Ibid.* p217.

¹⁰ Floyd, Jr., Samuel A. and Marsha J. Reisser. “The Sources and Resources of Classic Ragtime Music” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 4 (1984):p22.

¹¹ “Syncretism” Wikipedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syncretism> [Accessed: January 2009]

The introduction, in addition to the discussion of syncretism, proposes a basic overview of the history of slave migration through Latin America, specifically in relation to how cultural traits of Latin American music influenced classical ragtime. Later in the article, they comment briefly on possible Spanish influences, which I believe should be discussed in conjunction with migratory patterns of both slaves and explorers. The idea is completely dismissed within two sentences, suggesting that the concept was formed from “superficial inquiry or a lack of familiarity with acculturation processes”¹², but I contend that the Spanish were highly active in the Caribbean during exploration and the slave trade, and I am puzzled as to how their influences can be discounted so quickly. The Spanish have highly diverse music that was influenced over the centuries by Middle Eastern and African musics, in addition to European dances. Spanish explorers and traders would have brought this music with them during their travels in the Caribbean, and eventually it would have travelled to the busy port of New Orleans. It is possible that a more in-depth study of the port of New Orleans may provide additional information as to how Spanish, Caribbean and Latin American influences entered the USA.

The conclusion statement provides substantial insight into this article and begins by stating that they have “tried to demonstrate that the salient features of classic ragtime music came to the genre from two main sources (European music and African music),

¹² Floyd, Jr., Samuel A. and Marsha J. Reisser. “The Sources and Resources of Classic Ragtime Music” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 4 (1984):p35.

entering directly through Euro-American social dance music and Afro-American folk music.”¹³

Social Dance Music in the United States is the point of departure for Floyd and Reisser to suggest that “significant cross-influences that resulted in the Africanization of European tastes and the Europeanization of African tastes, with both trends eventually making possible the emergence and acceptance of a new music.”¹⁴ The form of ragtime music is derived primarily from nineteenth-century social dance music with the 16 measure strains and repeated sections. The harmonic practices, are derived more from the March than from social dance music, and this is evident in the harmonic movement to the subdominant. Berlin confirms this in his book, “Ragtime - A Musical and Cultural History” where he states:

The most conclusive substantiation must be in the music itself, and in this respect the evidence is abundant. When early rags are compared with marches of the same and immediately preceding years, the parallels are so close that significant distinctions can be found in only two areas: meter and rhythm.¹⁵

This brings us to a discussion of rhythm, which is discussed at great lengths in the article with emphasis being placed on importance of understanding “the way these elements migrated and developed” in order to understand “their use and function in classic ragtime.”¹⁶. There is some mention of the hemiola rhythm, and although this rhythm is more commonly associated with Spanish and Latin American music, they

¹³ Ibid:p51.

¹⁴ Ibid:p23.

¹⁵ Berlin, Edward A. *Ragtime - A Musical and Cultural History*. California: University of California Press, 1980, 2002: p100.

¹⁶ Floyd, Jr., Samuel A. and Marsha J. Reisser. “The Sources and Resources of Classic Ragtime Music” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 4 (1984):p24.

instead consider parallels to African music, supported by two sources, Nettl and Behague (1973) and Nketia (1974). These African rhythms are then traced to Caribbean and Latin America origins with a quote from Ekwueme (1974) that states they are, “found all over Africa, throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, and in many parts of the United States”¹⁷.

Focusing on their exploration of rhythmic considerations within ragtime, the following points were most prominent in their conclusion. First, that the rhythmic character of ragtime music is derived primarily from “african approaches to music making” with discussion of “tied and untied syncopation”¹⁸ and their relationship to early/primary/classic and secondary rags. Secondary rags, which characteristically displayed untied, dotted rhythms (figure 1) lead more to Caribbean and Latin American music such as the “Cuban habanera, the Argentinean tango, the Dominican merengue, and many Trinidadian calypsos.”¹⁹ In addition, untied syncopation occurs within the quarter-note beat, whereas tied syncopation occurs between quarter-note beats, which clearly shifts the accentuation from weak to strong beats. They dismiss Berlin’s treatment of this topic stating that he “tells us nothing about rhythm...only about notation--and inadequate notation at that.”, but it is clear that it is not merely a notational distinction and in fact can help trace the origins of the rhythms to both African and Latin

¹⁷ Ekwueme, Lazarus E.N. African-music retentions in the New World. *The Black Perspective in Music*, 1974, 2: p135.

¹⁸ Floyd, Jr., Samuel A. and Marsha J. Reisser. “The Sources and Resources of Classic Ragtime Music” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 4 (1984):p51.

¹⁹ Roberts, John Storm. Black Music of Two Worlds. New York: Scherer Books, 1972, Rev 2/1988:p50.

American roots. Both tied and untied syncopations were used by Scott Joplin--most evident in his *School of Ragtime* exercises.

Figure 1 - Rhythmic pattern found in the black music of the Americas²⁰ and also linked to Afro-Parisian music, Puerto Rican dances and the salon meringue in Haiti²¹



Historical evidence of Afro-Caribbean dance music in Cuba (circa 1580) is provided in order to show the movement of the habanera from Africa to the Caribbean. Focus is placed on the habanera, rumba, and tango, and all of them are described as “additive rhythms that are common to African-derived musics”²² without any focus on the Caribbean. Problems arise when the Hispanic hemiola is discussed because it is quite possible that its increased use in Europe may have been a result of increased African contact in the 16th century. The habanera was both a Cuban and European rhythm, and consequently, there is little basis for regarding them as originally African, although they might have been African-derived. John Storm Roberts, in his book “The Latin Tinge” explains the link between the habanera and ragtime:

It has already been pointed out that the habaneras ritmo de tango was virtually identical with the cakewalk rhythm - and in fact, both are versions of a rhythmic motif common in a wide range of Afro-American music... So when Eubie Blake says that pianist Jesse Pickett used a habanera rhythm for this composition “The Dream” in the 1880s, it is virtually certain that it was in fact a habanera, not a direct development from the cakewalk.²³

²⁰ Ibid:p50.

²¹ Ibid:p135.

²² Floyd, Jr., Samuel A. and Marsha J. Reisser. “The Sources and Resources of Classic Ragtime Music” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 4 (1984):p26,

²³ Roberts, John Storm. The Latin Tinge - The Impact of Latin American Music on the United States. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999: p39.

There is additional discussion concerning melodies and rhythms with emphasis on accentuations and cross-rhythms found in the tango, merengue, calypso and meyorana, and again, these are all linked to African music.

In agreement with Berlin's research, Lloyd & Reisser attempt to discredit previous scholarship that links Louis Gottschalk as a precursor to ragtime music. They support this argument with score analysis of several Gottschalk pieces, focusing mostly on rhythm. They do, however, admit that he was influenced by Latin American and Black American folk music, but conclude that Gottschalk's *La Bamboula* does not show pre-ragtime characteristics. Is it possible that they analysed the score with a predisposed notion that they wanted to disqualify any lineages therefore creating bias? If the score is analysed from the opposite view, to prove lineage, then the following characteristics are apparent:

1. There is a definite "oom-pah" bass line apparent throughout the piece dividing the beat into four eighth-notes.
2. Rhythmic motifs of the right hand are definitely visible in classic ragtime and were discussed earlier in this article where Lloyd & Reisser attempt to link them to Latin American and African rhythms. These include the division of the beats by sixteenth notes and a dotted-eighth-sixteenth rhythm.

The New Grove Oxford Music online references Gottschalk as "a direct precursor of ragtime"²⁴, and it is therefore an interesting argument that has failed to be developed fully within this paper, most likely due to time and space constraints.

Discourse arising around black religious music and black banjo music clearly link rhythmic motifs from hand-clapping rhythms that were imitated by black banjo players

²⁴ *Louis Moreau Gottschalk*.

<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/11530>
[accessed December, 2008]

and then to ragtime music. Banjo influence seems quite important because it can provide both straight bass and additive rhythms in the melody, like a keyboard.

Roberts is the main support for this argument, and on two occasions in his book, *Black Music of Two Worlds*, comments on the origins of the Banjo being rooted in Africa²⁵.

He is also most likely the original source of Lloyd & Reisser's assumption linking banjo and ragtime because he states that, "there can be no doubt that ragtime's right-hand syncopation, which uses rhythmic patterns basic to black music from virtually every part of the New World, came from the banjo rhythms..."²⁶. Roberts also quotes novelist, Rupert Hughes, who in 1899 wrote that "... banjo figuration is very noticeable in ragtime music and division of one of the beats into two short notes is traceable to the hand clapping."²⁷

Additive rhythm was not found in the predecessors of ragtime, but, as referenced by Roberts, instead developed from banjo players. Lloyd and Reisser state that "the additive patterns of classic ragtime came by way of Latin America, and entered the genre directly from the music of black banjo players"²⁸. Unfortunately, they failed to make a connection between Latin America and banjo players. Did the banjo players derive their music from Latin America? This has not been stated in the article and therefore, the link is broken. Earlier in the article, in the section on rhythms, they quoted J. H. Kwabena Nketia as saying "the use of additive rhythms in duple, triple, and

²⁵ Roberts, John Storm. *Black Music of Two Worlds*. New York: Scherer Books, 1972, Rev 2/1988:p24,49.

²⁶ Ibid:p200.

²⁷ Roberts, John Storm. *Black Music of Two Worlds*. New York: Scherer Books, 1972, Rev 2/1988:p199.

²⁸ Floyd, Jr., Samuel A. and Marsha J. Reisser. "The Sources and Resources of Classic Ragtime Music" *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 4 (1984):p33.

hemiola patterns is the hallmark of rhythmic organization in African music”²⁹, which contradicts their statement in the Banjo and Additive Rhythm section that “additive patterns of classic ragtime came by way of Latin America”³⁰.

Lloyd and Reisser include a large section containing formal analysis of classic ragtime pieces with a discussion of form, melody, accompaniment, rhythm, scales, texture and harmonies. There are two main issues surrounding their discussion of their analysis.

First, there are two definite language issues. The statement, “*At least some portion of virtually all of the sections of the ragtime pieces we examined...*” (emphasis added)³¹ and ““a textural practice that is *probably* African-derived *may frequently* be seen in the introductory sections of classic ragtime works”³², are incredibly vague due to a high number of weasel words, which results in the decreased validity of the statement, therefore, detracting from the otherwise thorough analysis.

This language predicament also arises earlier in the paper where they state that “All of the black musical genres of the time would later contribute to the rhythmic practices of classic ragtime.”³³ One must be cautious about using the word “All” in a statement such as this.

Second, they continue to overtly omit their initial goal of emphasizing Latin American influences on ragtime in their discussion of scalar resources by drawing

²⁹ Neketia, J.H. Kwabena. *The Music of Africa*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1974: p131.

³⁰ Floyd, Jr., Samuel A. and Marsha J. Reisser. “The Sources and Resources of Classic Ragtime Music” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 4 (1984):p33.

³¹ *Ibid*:p37.

³² *Ibid*:p40.

³³ *Ibid*:p29.

attention to African European and Black Folk Traditions, but not once mentioning any Latin American traditions or music. It is not until they discuss a quote by Roberts that they reintroduce the idea of Latin American influences, only to back down again in the next paragraph stating that the rhythms are “African-derived”.

Complications with the analysis also exist in the section, Folk Rag tradition, where it is described as playing an important role in the syncretization process with recordings provided as evidence. Lloyd and Reisser admit that there are few recordings in existence, but that they yield ample evidence. They proceed with a formal analysis of Joplin’s *Somethin’ Doin* providing verifiable evidence of the association. Unfortunately, their language usage becomes problematic where they state that it is “probably a “throw-back” to pre-classic folk-rag music-making”³⁴, specifically, the word “probably”. They have attempted to provide concrete evidence through score analysis, but concluded rather weakly that the association exists.

Finally, contradictions appear in the section on Cakewalk, where Lloyd & Reisser use the titles of repertoire as proof that they contain rhythms and melodic motifs consistent with classic ragtime. It is not until the end of the paragraph that they qualify this statement by saying that “Although contemporary observers and at least some of the musicians of the time considered all such music, including “syncopated two steps” and coon songs, as ragtime (see Berlin, 1980, p.106)” Their use of Berlin’s reference with regards to this topic is interesting because on page 32 they suggest that “Berlin’s methodology requires that he combine most “syncopated” music into one category,

³⁴ Ibid:p31.

which approach may lead some readers to a false view of the style and its historical evolution". Many music publishers were known to publish songs with multiple "catch-titles", regardless of whether the piece of music was a cakewalk or a two-step, and when ragtime music became the latest "fad", many songs were mislabeled in order to sell more copies. Lloyd and Reisser attempt to reconcile this conundrum by stating that "perhaps there was a time when the line separating these various genres was vague"³⁵, but this too nullifies their previous argument of utilizing song titles to find evidence of classic-ragtime characteristics. Furthermore, the language is weak in this section where they state, "it is generally recognized that cakewalk music was derived from the march...". Who is it "generally recognized" by? Where are the citations?

In closing, Lloyd and Reisser's concluding assertion³⁶, stated at the beginning of this paper, provides a fairly accurate description of ragtime music, but surprisingly makes no mention of Latin America. They make every intention of providing new and exciting links to Latin American music, but continually fall back into African origins. Within the first three paragraphs of the introduction they discussed the importance of "African slaves ... had come by way of Latin America where their musical practices were influenced by the various Caribbean cultures.", but unfortunately they fail to fully develop this exciting link to the origins of ragtime music.

³⁵ Ibid:p34.

³⁶ Ibid:p51.

"The structural characteristics, the harmony, the chromaticism, the major mode, and the lyricism of classic ragtime are all European-derived. Its additive rhythms, rhythmic polarity, its short-phrase melodic constructions, and pentatonic tendencies come from Africa."

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