



Composer Focus

Scott Joplin

(1868? - April 1, 1917)

Scott Joplin was an African-American pianist and composer who is often called the “King of Ragtime.” Although his exact birth date is unknown, historians believe he was born around 1868 near Linden, Texas.

Joplin was born into a musical family; his mother sang and played the banjo, and his father played the violin. Joplin showed a talent for piano early on, studying piano with several local teachers and later attending George R. Smith College to study music.

Joplin honed his skills by working as a traveling musician, performing on both piano and cornet in venues across the southern United States and, most notably, at the World’s Fair in Chicago in 1893. His performances at this World’s Fair contributed greatly to the popularity of ragtime music, as many visitors from around the world were introduced to the genre for the first time.

In 1895, Joplin began publishing his ragtime music. The publication of his “Maple Leaf Rag” in 1899 made Joplin famous and served to influence many future composers of both ragtime and jazz music. Joplin worked hard to establish ragtime as a respected genre of music, writing more than 40 ragtime piano solos, two ragtime ballets, and an opera.

Joplin died in 1917, marking the end of the ragtime era. However, there was a resurgence of interest in Joplin’s music in the 1970’s, and in 1976 Joplin was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his contributions to American music.