







ELI H. NEWBERGER

## THE TRANSITION FROM RAGTIME TO IMPROVISED PIANO STYLE

Strictly speaking, notating jazz is impossible. No symbolic vocabulary can depict the extraordinary, urgent sense of personality and spontaneity in an improvised chorus. Nonetheless, the notes are important, and an accurate, sympathetic notation system is necessary to effect a fair comparison of styles.






In the present study, certain notational conventions have been modified in an attempt to convey more fully the sound and spirit of each transcribed solo. Traditionally, jazz "eighth notes" have been written  with the intention of sounding more like . This is the most general case; there is, however, quite a diversity of performed "eighth notes" in the history of jazz. The familiar "ragged-eighths" figure  was perhaps played precisely that way when ragtime was ragtime. Very often the boogie-woogie pianists of the twenties played  as genuinely equal-valued. And the figures  and  are not uncommon among the proselytes of "hard bop" today. It is hoped that by writing the music in close approximation to the way it *sounds*, an element of consistency will be achieved.



Frequent discrete accents and graduated dynamics are central to the nature of jazz and present certain difficulties in the notation of jazz piano solos. Here as elsewhere, accents tend to give the impression of lengthening the emphasized note's duration. Because the piano is a polyphonic instrument, there are numberless special ways to create accents, in addition to those available to, say, the trumpet and the

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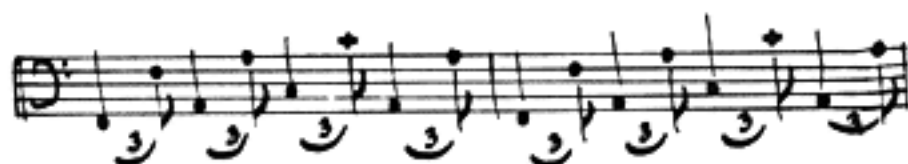
clarinet. Moreover, the peculiar nature of piano tone itself—that is, a quick decay rate—*necessitates* a constantly varying loudness level, hence, in effect, an almost infinite number of accent-types.



I have generalized these to three accent figures: sforzando, ; ; and a new “tenuto” marking, . This last figure denotes a slightly greater degree of loudness and also an amount of actual, though small, lengthening of duration. Where in some instances my notated  might be closer to  in real rhythmic value, it must be understood that the aim of the new notation is to distinguish between “senses” of jazz piano notes somewhat more simply and precisely than do standard markings.



There is not very much rhythmic difference, in other than very slow tempi, between  and , to be sure, and more often than not it is context which makes one marking preferable to the other. For example, in a boogie-woogie bass such as Bob Zurke’s, where the sense is more “eight to the bar” than “four over four,” the figures



seem preferable. However, Pete Johnson’s left hand would more conveniently be described



Most of Teddy Wilson’s “eighth notes” seem to turn out as , whereas Horace Silver’s seem . Naturally, small variations occur from measure to measure in nearly every solo.

The other notation devices are, at least so far as jazz notation itself is concerned, the conventional ones. Notes which are understated or just touched, left hand chords which are barely struck, and notes which appear to be unintentional are written in parentheses. “Open,” , and “close,” , brackets are phrase-marks. Metronome indications appear at the beginning of each solo, and dynamic markings occur between the staves “for both hands” and beneath the lower staff “for left hand only.” There are no dynamics “for right hand only.”

### From Ragtime to Improvisation

Ragtime differs from jazz. True ragtime, in essence, is notated piano music intended to be performed as written. Therefore the musical conception is to a great degree expressed in terms of a given invariant composition rather than, as became the case in jazz, freely *improvised* choruses on a chord scheme.

As the name implies, ragtime consists of musical "scraps": a series of three to five melodic strains over a more or less regular "oom-pah" bass make up the usual ragtime piece.

Most of the authentic ragtime literature was written between 1895 and 1915. It consists on the one hand of synthetic potpourris of "coon songs," "plantation dances," marches, cakewalks, and "characteristic two-steps," and on the other of through-composed piano pieces of more serious musical intent. *Brainard's Ragtime Collection*<sup>1</sup> contains 24 piano solos of the first type only, including "Rastus Johnson's Cake-Walk," "Piccaninny Rag (Shake Yo' Dusters)," and "Dusky Doings in Darktown"; the only protojazz elements in this folio are a regular left hand and occasional syncopations.

Those ragtime pieces that are indeed forerunners of jazz, and in particular of the jazz piano, are of the second type. They were composed mainly by blacks. The more visceral quality of these rags can be attributed to the source and inspiration of the "scraps," that is, to the black spiritual and folk song tradition rather than the more sentimental mainstream of 19th century American popular music. This manifestly important distinction between the sources of what are really *two* "rag-times" has, I believe, been unfortunately overlooked by writers in the field.

The metamorphosis to jazz was gradual. In the hands of some ragtime composers and performers, ragtime pieces, or choruses from them, became platforms for improvisation. Concepts of rhythm, and subsequently of notation, underwent remarkable and lasting changes. In the musical examples that appear on the following pages, these changes are documented.

Among the great ragtime composers were Scott Joplin, Joseph Lamb, James Scott, Tony Jackson, Benjamin Harney, and Artie Matthews. The main transition figures were Jelly Roll Morton, Eubie Blake, James P. Johnson, and Luckey Roberts.

Our examples comprise seven different interpretations of the 16-

measure second strain from "Maple Leaf Rag."<sup>2</sup> Two of these, the Brun Campbell performance and the one by Joplin himself, are representative of "authentic" ragtime playing. In these performances, certain deviations from the original published manuscript appear, but these scarcely rank as improvisations. On the other hand, the solos of Jelly Roll Morton (both the so-called "St. Louis" and "Correct" versions from his Library of Congress sessions), and those of Eubie Blake, James P. Johnson, and Willie "The Lion" Smith, show definite jazz characteristics in their more substantial departures from the actual text.

Wally Rose, Ralph Sutton, and Art Hodes, among others, have recorded "Maple Leaf;" these performances are in truth jazz versions and are therefore not included here, though it is worth noting their testimony to the durability of Joplin's masterpiece.

### Joplin Versions: Manuscript and Piano Roll

*Ex. 1. "Maple Leaf Rag," manuscript (second strain)*

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the second strain of "Maple Leaf Rag." The score is arranged in three systems, each with a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The tempo is marked "Tempo di Marcia" at the beginning. The first system includes a "trussolo" marking above the bass staff. Measure numbers 4, 8, and 12 are indicated in boxes above the treble clef staff. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings.



Joplin's performance differs from the manuscript in but a few places. In measures 3 and 10, he plays a three-note passing fillip in the left hand on the second beat, and in measures 4 and 8, he adds two non-chord neighbors to the A-flat—A-natural passing figure in the left hand.

The feeling of meter is quite definitely 2/4. Most ragtime pieces (with the exceptions of a few ragtime waltzes and marches) were notated in 2/4 and were intended to be played that way. A slight *accelerando* into measure 13 is typical of the liberties taken with tempo by many of the ragtime performers. The initial tempo is rather slow, and this too may be seen as typical of a "serious" rag interpretation. Joplin is said to have frequently decried flashy attempts at his work, and Jelly Roll Morton's comments about his "too fast St. Louis Version" indicate that speed itself was not a certification among the real ragtime cognoscenti.

*Ex. 2. Scott Joplin (1868-1917), Performance*<sup>3</sup>

(*J* = 78)

### Brun Campbell

Brun Campbell was a student of Joplin and earned his nickname, "The Ragtime Kid," from the composer. His performance of "Maple Leaf" resembles Joplin's in many ways. The tempo, feeling of meter, phrasing, and harmony are nearly identical, and deviations from the manuscript, aside from the key difference (which might have been due to a hyperactive recording instrument), are also of trimming rather than of conception.

It must be noted that the Joplin performance came from a piano roll and that Campbell's and the other "Maple Leaf" examples are from more recent recordings.

The dissonances between left hand A-flats and right hand A-naturals on the last eighths of measures 2 and 10 result from simple passing movement. Campbell varies the harmony proper only in measure 15, where he accents the third sixteenth note B-natural in the right hand (in the manuscript and in the Joplin version, the chord is syncopated) and gets a  $V^6_4$ -9th sound.

It is significant that the right hand positions remain the same in both performances; the ragtime "pivot notes," such as the F-sharp and the As in measure 1, are always analagous, and the color is the same. Very typical is the crescendo into measure 13. Most likely Joplin too varied the dynamics of his interpretation, but player rolls rarely indicate vol-

ume differences, and hence, save for accents, they do not appear in his solo.

The "authentic" ragtimers had a limited vocabulary of expressive effects. Unlike jazz pianists, their stylistic personalities were determined largely by their use of embellishments and variations of tempo and volume.

*Ex. 3. Brun Campbell (1884-1953)<sup>4</sup>*

The image displays a musical score for a piece by Brun Campbell, consisting of four systems of piano and bass staves. The score is written in 2/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked as  $\text{♩} = 82$ . The piece features a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. Measure numbers 3, 7, 11, and 16 are indicated in boxes above the staves. The notation includes dynamic markings such as  $ff$  and  $f$ , and articulation marks like accents and slurs. The bass line often features a steady eighth-note accompaniment, while the treble line has more complex rhythmic figures.

## Eubie Blake

This performance has aspects peculiar to both ragtime and jazz. It differs from the Joplin and Campbell versions in three main respects: meter, tempo, and rhythm. By and large the notes are analagous to the notes in those solos (the key is E-flat as opposed to A-flat and G in the Joplin and Campbell performances, respectively), and the phrasing in all three is identical. That these 16 measures are a "chorus" in an ensemble arrangement is singular and worthy of note. Here the piano is no longer a strictly solo instrument.

The metrical sense in Eubie Blake's playing is more 4/4 than 2/4. When, as in measures 1-3, his left hand plays a regular ragtime accompaniment, it is understated; in measures 10-12, the left hand plays a walking bass line much more prominently. Blake's accented syncopations in the left hand in measures 6, 8, and 12, and in the right hand in measures 13-15, solidify the 4/4 sense and lend a definite jazz feeling. Most of these syncops contain flatted third or other nonharmonic blue notes, and the prodding rhythm section contributes its own jazzy quality.

In this performance the tempo is a good deal quicker, and the "eighth notes" seem more to float over the rhythm. It will be seen that Jelly Roll Morton and James P. Johnson change even further Joplin's notion of "Maple Leaf."

Ex. 4. Eubie Blake (1883- )<sup>5</sup>

(J & 108)

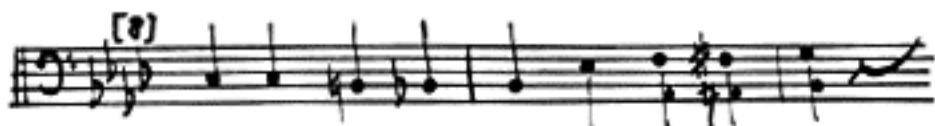




### Jelly Roll Morton: "St. Louis" and "Correct" Versions

Like Eubie Blake's performance, that of the King of the New Orleans Pianists imitating the St. Louis virtuosi rests on the borderline between ragtime and jazz. Jelly Roll's "St. Louis version" is notable for its unusual adherence to the notes of the manuscript, its extremely fast tempo, and its distinctive Morton quality. The feeling for meter is decidedly 4/4; Morton achieves the effect by merely playing all the left hand notes at the same dynamic level and by simplifying the right hand figures. For example, measures 3 and 4 have a total of 9 right hand notes where 12 occur in the manuscript.

In measures 8, 9, and 10 appear the left hand patterns which identify Morton's style in this solo. They are simple devices which "fill in" a walking bass. The understated left hand line in these measures is



Chords are played on the second and fourth beats of measure 8, on the second, third, and fourth beats of measure 9, and on the first beat of measure 10. A passing sixths chromatic sequence occurs in the last three chords, and the entire progression has the aspect of a "compressed" ragtime left hand.

*Ex. 5. Jelly Roll Morton (1885-1941), "St. Louis Version"*<sup>6</sup>

The image displays a musical score for the piece "St. Louis Version" by Jelly Roll Morton. The score is presented in four systems, each consisting of a treble and bass staff. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 238. Measure numbers 8, 9, 11, and 16 are indicated in boxes above the staves. The left hand features a "compressed" ragtime pattern with chords on the second and fourth beats of measure 8, and on the second, third, and fourth beats of measure 9, and on the first beat of measure 10. A passing sixths chromatic sequence is noted in the last three chords. The right hand contains a melodic line with various rhythmic values and articulations.

Morton's "Correct Version" of "Maple Leaf" is nothing less than a full-blown "Morton Version." The rocking "stomp" tempo and "swinging" quality of this performance are Jelly Roll's own, and, among other devices, the extra rhythmic variety and hands-together syncopations (measures 4, 8, 10, 12) lend a definite jazz character to the interpretation. Many "eighth note" types are in evidence here, and there is an increasing preponderance of "jazz eighths."

The extraordinary personality and vitality of Morton's playing are to some degree a consequence of his notion of the tune. While he does not exactly "improvise" on the chord-framework (the "melody" of the strain is indeed quite in evidence), Jelly Roll frequently alters notes and rhythms. He more or less completely changes the left hand from a constant pattern to a shifting, propulsive, supporting accompaniment.

In sum, Morton's idea of the way "Maple Leaf" ought to be played acknowledges its composer's intention of the piece as a unified composition and at the same time certifies the performer's right to "jazz it up."

*Ex. 6. Jelly Roll Morton (1885-1941), "Correct Version"*

(♩=102)

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the piano piece "Maple Leaf Rag" by Jelly Roll Morton. Each system consists of a treble clef staff (melody) and a bass clef staff (accompaniment). The first system includes a tempo marking of  $\text{♩} = 102$  and a dynamic marking of *pp*. The notation features complex rhythms, including triplets and syncopated patterns. The second system continues the piece with similar rhythmic complexity and includes a circled number '6' above the treble staff, likely indicating a measure or section. The overall style is characteristic of early jazz piano, with a focus on rhythmic variety and syncopation.

### James P. Johnson

Although this performance was recorded at Town Hall in 1946, the features which make it relevant to the "transition period" (and also to the "stride school" or "Harlem style" of jazz pianism which formed about James P. Johnson in the twenties) are very much in evidence.

There is not much question as to the improvisatory character of this chorus, and the wealth of ideas displayed here and in the other five "second strains" provide but a slight indication of the singular, nuclear force of this gifted pianist. Art Tatum, Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, Earl Hines, and Teddy Wilson are a few of the stylists who derived inspiration from James P. Johnson's playing. Some of his more characteristic figures can be seen in this example of "Maple Leaf."

Certain ragtime patterns which are not necessarily notated in the original manuscript pervade Johnson's version: his left hand, unlike

Morton's, varies only rarely; he frequently employs "pivot notes" between octaves in the right hand (measures 1, 4, 9, 15); he phrases and changes register in groups of two or four bars; and even his improvised figures gravitate about small, discrete snatches from the melody.

For example, the series of four-note, Tatum-like fillips which begins on the last beat of measure 4 and extends through the last beat of measure 8 relates directly to the E-flat, D, D-flat, C descending motif which forms the germ of the melody in the second strain.

The quick tempo, presence of a supporting rhythm section, and virtual absence of "ragtime eighth notes" also indicate that this is a largely jazz interpretation of "Maple Leaf Rag."

*Ex. 7. James P. Johnson (1894-1955)*<sup>7</sup>

The image shows a handwritten musical score for Ex. 7, James P. Johnson (1894-1955). The score is divided into three systems, each consisting of two staves (treble and bass clef). The first system is marked with a tempo of quarter note = 226 and a dynamic of 8va. The second system is marked with a dynamic of 8va. The third system is marked with a dynamic of 12. The notation includes various rhythmic figures, accidentals, and dynamic markings.



### Willie "The Lion" Smith

Wit, harmonic imagination, and sheer drive are the salient qualities of "The Lion's" style, and his performance of "Maple Leaf" reveals a genuine debt to the ragtime tradition.

For the most part, the melody of "Maple Leaf" is easily apprehensible, and the phrasing is simple and direct. It is interesting to note that Smith begins the (complete) recording in C and shifts to A-flat after an extended introduction. Often he adjusts the tempo, and he closes the final chorus with an apostrophe from Claude Debussy. The performance maintains the through-composed nature of the original piece.

This particular chorus on the second strain shows a specific 4/4 sense, a diversity of "eighth note" figures, and an unusual amount of harmonic enterprise. In measure 4, "The Lion" changes the melody chromatically; in measure 5, he contrasts a four-beat-long  $V_7$  of  $V$  harmony in the left hand with a two-and-two-beat  $II_7/V_7$  in the right hand; in measure 15, he cadences  $I^6_4/III^6_5(\text{maj.})/V_7/I$ .

Willie "The Lion" Smith's playing is typical of the stride school. In effect, the stride pianists personify the last interim stage in the transition from a ragtime to a wholly jazz conception of the piano. "The Lion," Fats Waller, Eubie Blake, Luckey Roberts, and of course James P. Johnson display in their jazz styles various generic ragtime devices, the most important of which are a more or less "fundamental" left hand, a certain feeling for melody, an elegant sense of phrase, a frequent use of right hand "pivot notes" and arpeggiate embroidery.

Ex. 8. Willie "The Lion" Smith (1893-1974)<sup>8</sup>

Handwritten musical score for Willie "The Lion" Smith's "The Lion". The score is written on five systems of two staves each (treble and bass clef). The tempo is marked *♩ = 144*. The piece features various musical notations including triplets, slurs, and dynamic markings. The first system includes the instruction *8va* and *3* (loco). The second system includes the instruction *6*. The third system includes the instruction *8va*. The fourth system includes the instruction *12* (loco). The fifth system includes the instruction *16*. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

## NOTES

1. *Brainard's Ragtime Collection* (New York: Brainard's Sons Co., 1899).
2. "Maple Leaf Rag" (Sedalia, Mo.: John Stark & Son, 1899).
3. Riverside RLP-1006 or Biograph BLP-1006Q. Liner notes for the April 1971 recording of Joplin's 1916 piano roll (Connorized 10265), prepared collaboratively by Michael Montgomery and Trebor Tichenor, indicate a strong possibility that the roll may have been edited and speculate that the halting quality of some of the playing may have been a consequence of "dementia paralytica—cerebral." This diagnosis, ostensibly found on Joplin's death certificate, is a medical euphemism for tertiary syphilis, which is differentiated in modern medical practice from senile dementia (confusion, impaired memory, and motor incoordination and tremors accompanying old age) and Alzheimer's disease (similar symptoms due to brain atrophy, usually manifested at an earlier age) by several spinal fluid and immunologic studies. In the absence of reliable data, it would be well simply to note that the roll was performed within 18 months of the master's death.
4. Euphonic Piano Series, vol. 1. Paul E. Affeldt observes in the liner notes that this recording was made well after Campbell's retirement from music and was recorded on acetate in California by Cecil Charles during the traditional jazz revival of the 1940s. The inscription on the original Brun label is said to support the motive for the recording, to help support Joplin's widow, Lottie: "MEMORIAL. The Maple Leaf Rag—1899 by Scott Joplin (Colored) as played by Brun Campbell as taught him by Scott Joplin in 1899—first white pianist to play it."
5. Fox 3003. This recording, made when Blake was said to be 75, includes sidemen Buster Bailey, clarinet; Bernard Addison, guitar; Milt Hinton or George Duvivier, bass; and Panama Francis, drums.
6. The two Morton performances were on Riverside RLP-140 and the Library of Congress series, RLP 9001-9012. The notes by Orrin Keepnews state: "These are all a part of the many hours of commentary, jazz history, exaggeration, singing, playing and autobiography recorded by Jelly Roll in 1938 at the Library of Congress."
7. Folkways FJ 2841. Made at Town Hall, New York, on September 21, 1946, this recording includes sidemen Baby Dodds, drums, and Pops Foster, bass.
8. Grand Award 33-368. Liner notes by Jorgen Grunnet Jepsen indicate that the recording was made between August and November 1957. Smith speaks on the record, noting that Joplin wrote "Maple Leaf" in A-flat. He plays it first "like I play it now," then "the way Mr. Joplin wrote it . . . reduce it to its lowest common denominator . . . from the sublime to the ridiculous." He recalls that Joplin's wife lived at 212 West 138 Street, had the whole house, and that it was a common occurrence to step in there at 6 a.m. and see "Art Tatum, Thomas 'Fats' Waller, Willie 'The Lion,' James P. Johnson, Eubie Blake, Wilbur Sweatman, Valaida Snow, Jackie Mabley—they all owe Jop room rent yet."