

Ragtime: It's a Cakewalk

One of the forms of music that was well-received in the pre-Civil War South was the cakewalk. It was a dance with a strutting step usually performed to syncopated music. The name comes from dance contests held by southern blacks in which the prizes were cakes. The popularity of the cakewalk continued until the end of the nineteenth century, by which time this dance music had found its way to the stages of the minstrel shows. It also became a favorite dance of the general public, with the music for these types of dances becoming well-liked. The type of music generally used for accompanying the cakewalk was known as *ragtime*.



"Jelly Roll" Morton

The word *ragtime* may have been derived from several sources. One probable early use came from a type of shuffling clog dance known as "ragging" that was performed by black men. Another early source claims that ragtime music got its name from the fact that it was written down. The paper that the music was written down on was referred to as a "rag." The purpose of the music was to provide "time" or certain rhythms for the dance steps to be accomplished. When you combined the two, you had ragtime music. Regardless of the origin, the name stuck and became very popular. The fact that this style of music was actually notated (written down) helped it to gain a higher level of popularity.

The style of music that was used for the cakewalk was transposed from the group of instruments used in the minstrel shows to a single instrument: the piano. With his left hand, the pianist played a "boom-chuck" rhythm that attempted to simulate the foot-stomping and hand-clapping that would occur during the cakewalk, while with his right hand he played ragged or syncopated melodies that had been originally written for banjos. The manner in which the notes were put together came from the European style of composition, or traditional harmony, and so ragtime is a unique blend of European and African styles joined together in one form.

There were two main cities where ragtime first gained popularity. One was New Orleans, Louisiana; the other was St. Louis, Missouri. The best-known composer and performer of St. Louis ragtime was Scott Joplin (1868–1917). He was the son of a former slave and was born in Texas in 1868. When he was seventeen he moved to St. Louis where he was first "discovered" and made his name as a first-rate ragtime player and composer. Other important composers and performers of ragtime music were James Scott and "Jelly Roll" Morton. Ragtime had an important influence on the Dixieland style of piano playing. Many of the same elements that are found in ragtime were carried over and implemented in the piano accompaniment style of the New Orleans Dixieland music.