Journal of the Society for American Music (2010) Volume 4, Number 2, pp. 251–254.
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BOOK REVIEWS

Scott Joplin and the Age of Ragtime. By Ray Argyle. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2009.

In his acknowledgments, Argyle pays tribute to the legendary book that essentially started research into ragtime and Scott Joplin: *They All Played Ragtime* (1950), by Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis. He omits Janis's name, however, pairing Blesh instead with Kathleen Benson. Benson was the coauthor with James Haskins of another book: *Scott Joplin: The Man Who Made Ragtime* (1978). Turning to the bibliography, we find the Blesh–Benson pairing repeated, and Haskins, with his name misspelled as "Hoskins," is cited as the sole author.

We all make errors, but these missteps are not atypical aberrations; rather, they characterize a book replete with jaw-dropping misstatements. We read in disbelief as Argyle cites "James M. Cohen" as the creator of a 1906 musical, *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (38). There was a musical by that name in 1897, by Hugh Morton and Gustave Kerker, but Argyle undoubtedly has in mind George M. Cohan's 1904 musical *Little Johnny Jones.* That show features the song "The Yankee Doodle Boy," in which the chorus opens with the words "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy." That, however, is not the end of Argyle's blunders on this issue. He places the opening of *Yankee Doodle Dandy* at the Casino Theatre on 25 July 1906. The Casino, on that date, was showing *The Social Whirl*; George M. Cohan, on the same evening, was appearing at the Aerial Gardens (the roof of the New Amsterdam Theatre) in *The Governor's Son.* Argyle compiles an amazing number of errors in the space of three lines.

Equally appalling is Argyle's description of African American blues pioneer W. C. Handy as "the young white leader of a black band" (159), and his naming of Igor Stravinsky as the composer of Debussy's "Golliwogg's Cake-Walk" (169). Such errors occur with a dizzying frequency.

We wonder how Argyle, while writing a book about a composer and the culture of his time, can be so unfamiliar with these icons of twentieth-century music. Then, reading further, we wonder how well he knows the very subject of his book. He describes Joplin as "light-skinned" (11), but that description fails to match up with any of the pictures of Joplin that he reproduces in his book. He says that the cover of Joplin's "Euphonic Sounds" has an old photo of Joplin, crudely retouched in an effort to convert his old-fashioned, stiff collar into a more modern style of dress (81). There is such a photo of Joplin, but it is not on the cover of any piece of published music; it is apparently a publicity photo. The cover of "Euphonic Sounds" has a portrait of Joplin in an old-fashioned, stiff collar, without any sign of touch-up efforts. He reproduces a cover for Joplin's "The Entertainer," but it is not a cover from the period; rather, it is a strange amalgam with the bottom half taken from an early printing of "The Maple Leaf Rag," and the top bearing the title in an incongruent, 1970s-style font. We are left with the impression that Arygyle not only did not bother to look at Joplin's historic covers, but also did not even examine his own illustrations.

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Argyle reveals a parallel weakness in his understanding of the music of ragtime and of the following piano styles. He writes: "One of the reasons for the abandonment of pure Ragtime [in the 1920s] was that much of it was too difficult for people to play themselves" (170). This statement should be met with a collective gasp by all those who have played the popular piano style that succeeded ragtime in the 1920s, the technically challenging piano novelties represented by such pieces as "Kitten on the Keys" or "Dizzy Fingers" by Zez Confrey, or other equally intricate works by Roy Bargy, Rube Bloom, Phil Ohman, and others. Whatever the reasons for flagging interest in ragtime and enthusiasm for its replacement, novelty piano, ragtime's technical pianistic challenges are not among them.

Writing a work of historical nonfiction usually requires use of secondary sources, and one should be able to detect which sources are reliable, and which fail meet that standard. For Joplin's life, Argyle refers to a few good books, but he references also books written for pre-adults, such as a couple of Joplin biographies designed for middle and high school students: one by Katherine Preston, another by Mark Evans. Regardless of how well such books fulfill their function, they should not be mistaken for books of critical scholarship. He also uses books with obvious fictional material. We note the fictional account borrowed from Ian Whitcomb's *Irving Berlin and Ragtime America* (1988). The passage concerns the meeting between Scott Joplin and songwriter/journalist Monroe Rosenfeld. The two did meet, and Rosenfeld wrote an article about Joplin that appeared in the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* on 7 June 1903. Whitcomb, however, enlivens Rosenfeld's report with a fictional scene that has Rosenfeld hopping to Joplin's rag "The Entertainer" and Joplin commenting on Rosenfeld's dance. Argyle accepts this imaginary comment as authentic and uses it to discuss Joplin's manner of speaking (54).

Argyle does not need other writers' fictionalizations: He's quite adept at inventing his own tales. He has Joplin arriving in New York carrying only a single, small suitcase; Joplin seeking out John Stark, his frequent publisher, on Tin Pan Alley (even though Stark's office was a half-dozen blocks away from that fabled street); Stark showing Joplin the sights of New York and taking him for drinks at Ike Hines's Professional Club, an actual saloon memorialized in James Weldon Johnson's novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1911); Joplin meeting his third wife, Lottie, in Washington, D.C., at a party held in his honor. If any of these tales is true, it is pure coincidence; Argyle presents no evidence in support of these original "facts." His extensive fictionalization throughout detracts from, dilutes, and obscures any factual material presented.

In addition to exploring the life of Scott Joplin, Argyle states his mission to "focus on the essential personalities and issues of the Ragtime era" (vii). Toward this end, he presents vignettes of prominent personalities and brief descriptions of issues that he proposes characterize the period. He tends to favor salacious issues, such as prostitution, the struggle over birth control, and Anthony Comstock's efforts to suppress vice. He devotes six pages to recounting the tale of Evelyn Nesbit and her millionaire husband, Henry K. Thaw, who murdered her former lover, the celebrated architect Stanford White. Another six pages tell of the of the breach of promise lawsuit filed by actress Daisy Markham against British nobleman William Bingham Compton. Argyle justifies inclusion of this scandal by designating

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Markham a "Ragtime actress" who, in her stage roles, played "Ragtime themes" (94). Among the vignettes are sections on James Reese Europe, a major figure in New York's black popular music during the 1910s, and the celebrated dancers he served as music director, Irene and Vernon Castle. Most of the other featured personalities are not primarily connected with music, such as film stars Charlie Chaplin and Mary Pickford; painter/sculptor Frederic Remington; prize fighters Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries; and authors H. G. Wells, Jack London, Upton Sinclair, and Edith Wharton. Some of these vignettes are moderately interesting, but I'm not sure these disparate threads tie together in a unified theme to represent the ragtime years, nor can I speak to the accuracy of the tales because they cover too diverse an area for me to address with any authority.

Throughout the book, Argyle drops in bits of incidental information. Although not necessarily of major importance, the information he provides is often wrong or misleading. John Stark's daughter Eleanor was a renowned classical piano recitalist in Missouri and her father's major adviser on musical matters. In her hometown of Sedalia, newspapers frequently referred to her familiarly as "Nel" or "Nellie." Argyle renames her "Elena," a name by which she was never known, and he claims that it was at her urging that Stark published Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag" (34). This claim is not reflected in any of the anecdotes regarding that legendary piece. The Joplin rag that Stark reportedly published at his daughter's urging is "The Ragtime Dance."

Another example of a misleading tidbit is in Argyle's discussion of James Reese Europe. Europe's father, Argyle tells us, "accomplished the almost unheard of feat of working his way through law school at Howard University" (107). Does Argyle not know that Howard University was established to make college education available to African Americans? However impressive the elder Europe's accomplishment on a personal level—and that accomplishment should not be minimized—he was only one in an entire school of black students, hardly qualifying his achievement as an "almost unheard of feat."

It is difficult to find anything favorable to say about this book, but there is one Joplin detail worth noting. Argyle uses the subscription online database newspaperarchive.com to uncover twenty ragtime news items from 1893 to 1974, which he reprints in full. Most are commonplace articles, typical of many dozens of similar pieces, and contribute little, if anything, to our knowledge of the era. One newspaper item, however, stands out: Dated 23 August 1893, it tells of Scott Joplin stopping in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, with his Texas Medley Quartette, traveling from Chicago en route to the Pacific Coast. Whereas Argyle brings this item to our attention (11 and 201), he does not highlight its ramifications. It is the earliest documented reference to the Texas Medley Quartette; it reveals the names of the quartet's members at that time (others have been named for different periods); it supports the anecdote placing Scott Joplin in Chicago at the time of the World's Fair (May 1893 through October 1893) and indicates that he was not there during the entire fair; and it suggests we should look for Joplin's presence in the Western states, a possibility that Argyle dismisses.

The publisher McFarland is not without blame for its part in this book. The publisher claims on its Web site (http://www.mcfarlandpub.com/about.html) to be

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"one of the leading publishers of scholarly and reference books in the United States." Its most obvious failure is to sufficiently vet this book. Once the manuscript reached the production stage, the publisher allowed peculiar editorial practices to slide by. The word "ragtime" consistently receives a capital "R," even when the word is used in quoted passages that originally, and correctly, have an initial lower-case "r"; the terms "jazz" and "blues" do not receive a special initial capital. In addition, there is no consistency in use of quotation marks or italics for music titles; in the same paragraph, we might read of "Pine Apple Rag" and *Wall Street Rag* (70). The author is not alone in displaying a lack of attention, and these typographical anomalies top off the failure of the book's content.

Many of the book's errors, considered individually, might be viewed as trivial. However, the accumulation of them is so overwhelming that, in the absence of any great new revelations to act as a counterbalance, the book is weighed down by a breathtaking ineptitude.

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Journal of the Society for American Music (2010) Volume 4, Number 2, pp. 254–256.
© The Society for American Music 2010 doi:10.1017/S1752196310000052

Native American Song at the Frontiers of Early Modern Music. By Olivia Bloechl. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

This review begins with a caveat: Although the title of this book gives the impression that Native American song is a central topic of the text, the primary theme of the narrative is how Europeans'—specifically British and French—encounters with Native peoples of North America influenced European art music of the late renaissance through the late baroque eras. Perhaps one-quarter of the book directly connects to the European experience on the ground in colonial North America, while the bulk of the writing covers Stuart court masques, the ballets and *tragédies lyriques* of Lully, and Rameau's operas. Bloechl does not deal with direct musical transference from one continent to the other, but rather with how written accounts and iconic representations of Native Americans affected the cultures of European art music during a time of colonial expansion and religious upheaval.

The author makes clear in the opening chapter that the aim of the text is to offer a different kind of theoretical model than has been used previously in analyzing pieces such as Lully's *Le Temple de la paix* (1685) and Rameau's *Les Indes galantes* (1735), an important facet of the project given that both of these works have been extensively discussed by other authors. Bloechl has two primary theoretical influences, that of postcolonial theory (Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, et al.) and the sociology of Michel Foucault. She is explicit in giving the sources of her theoretical underpinnings, stating that "with Foucault's writings as a guiding force, then, this study pursues the genealogical question of how French and English colonial encounters with native American music altered the conditions that

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