Scott Joplin (1868-1917)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Costume for FAME players</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men’s dress shirt cut in strips.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Music

Play track 1, Boom Boom Pow by Black Eyed Peas performed by Kidz Bop Kidz. What type of music is this called? (Rap) Can you hear the two different rhythms being played? Now for a minute don’t pay attention to the lyrics but listen to the sound that is like clapping. Then see if you can hear a quieter thumping under it. There are two different rhythms being played at the same time. With your left hand show the beat that is the clapping beat and with your right hand show the thumping beat at the same time. Can you do it? Its hard to do two different things at the same time can you pat your head and rub your tummy at the same time?

Rap is the music of today but it had its beginnings many years ago with jazz music. And jazz music like Rap has two different rhythms going at the same time. After the civil war, near the turn of the century another jazz took the country by storm. It had an unusual name that has something to do with my costume. Can you guess what it was called? Why I’m wearing such ragged clothes? (Ragtime)

The Black Eyed Peas are not our composer for today; however, our composer for today did play an important part in the history of Black Music. Scott Joplin is known as the King of Ragtime music. Let’s listen to our feature music piece “Maple Leaf Rag” (track 2) which is Scott Joplin’s most famous rag. While I play this listen for more than one melody playing at the same time. Play for awhile then pause. Did you hear more than one melody?

Playing rag music on the piano is very hard because both melodies have to be played at the same time. We might not recognize the two melodies right away, but it’s the combination of the two melodies that make Joplin’s music so unique.

Ragtime music was “dancing” music played on the piano. The left hand would play steady beats, while the right hand played a syncopated melody, against the left hand’s steady-beat pattern or strong beat. Syncopation is simply moving the accent from a strong beat to a weaker one. The rhythm was ragged or uneven, so they called the musicians “rag pickers”. They called the complicated musical structure “ragged time,” The name soon shortened to ragtime. Let’s try this exercise. (Divide class in half. Have group 1 count 1-4 and clap on the 1 and 3. “That’s the accented beat or strong beat. Now group 2 I want you to clap on the 2 and 4 while group 1 lightly claps on the 1 and 3” Have them do this. “Now group 2 is clapping on the off beat or weaker beat.”)

Let’s listen to the rest of the song (Continue playing track 2. While playing ask question and explain answer.)
Can you hear a kind of clinky or tinny sound in the piano? That sound is very typical in Ragtime music. Why do you think the piano sounds that way? How many of you have seen the inside of a piano? There are small wooden pieces that look like hammers that strike the metal string. These hammers are covered with felt, therefore the sound produced is very mellow. When the string is hit the whole note is played. That is how a nice new piano works.

What happens when the piano gets old? Felt on the hammers wear out. Does this change the sound it makes? The wooden hammer hits the metal directly and makes a tinny sound. Back in the olden days, black musicians weren’t allowed to play in white clubs where pianos were kept in good condition. They were only allowed to play in black clubs where older pianos were used. The tinny sound of an old piano gradually became the sound, which ragtime musician’s preferred. Ragtime players like the sound so much they would sometimes remove the front of their pianos to achieve the unique sound. Nowadays, musicians can get the same sound effect by inserting tacks into the felt so the metal tack hits the string directly.

**The Composer**

Scott Joplin was born in Texas around 1868. We don’t know exactly where or when he was born, but a US Census (like the one we are currently doing) locates him there in July 1870 as a two year old. 1870 was the year that Texas was admitted back into the Union, after the Civil War. (So Texas was brought back into the US as a state.) Reconstruction (rebuilding after the civil war) had been difficult, and record keeping was poor.

He had a very musical family. His father a former slave born in North Carolina played the violin. His mother was freeborn from Kentucky, sang and played the banjo. His brothers also sang and played guitar.

Scott’s mother supported the family by cleaning houses and Scott was allowed to use the piano in one of those homes, teaching himself to play. Scott’s mother encouraged him to practice and play the piano while she worked. By 1882, Scott’s mother had purchased a piano and the family had moved to Texarkana – a town that straddles the Texas-Arkansas border. The young boy’s talent was noticed by a German-born music teacher Professor Julius Weiss; he listened to Scott play and offered to give him lessons. Scott worried that he could not pay the professor (music teacher). Professor Weiss said he would be honored to teach Scott. He told Scott that when he was young, growing up in Germany he had been a poor child. He had met a wealthy German gentleman who knew of his talent and gave him a scholarship, and so he would do the same for Scott. What was supposed to be an hour a week turned into hours everyday.

The Professor taught Scott classical music like Mozart and Chopin, composition, and taught him about opera. One day Scott asked the professor why operas were always written in German, Italian or French. “What a silly question!” said the professor, “they are expected to be performed in their own countries?”

“Aren’t there any operas in English?” asked Scott.

“No,” said the professor, “but perhaps you will write one some day.” This thought would haunt Scott for the rest of his life.
At 16, Scott felt it was time to go out in the world and make his mark as a musician. He started by getting any job he could, dance halls, playing on riverboats and bars just to mention a few. He was gaining a reputation for himself, and rag pickers would come to see if they could beat him. This was like the gunfights of the old west.

Scott was living in Sedalia, Missouri, at this time attending Smith College to study music. Smith College was for blacks only. A new nightclub was opening up in town called the Maple Leaf Club. It was suggested to the owner that to make the club an instant success, he should hire Scott Joplin as the resident pianist, which he did. Scott, as the resident pianist at the Club was refereed to as “The Entertainer.” Now with a permanent job, Scott began to write and create his own music.

He went to a local publisher with two rags, “Original Rags” and “Maple Leaf Rag”. The publisher was not too excited about publishing rags because they were so difficult to play that he didn’t think they would sell. To Scott’s disappointment, only the “Original Rag” was published.

Scott approached another publisher who agreed to publish “Malpe Leaf Rag” and that was the first time that Scott Joplin had a formal contract. He was paid $50 up front and would receive 1 penny per copy sold. 30,000 copies were sold in Sedalia, so the publisher decided to take the composition and Joplin to the bigger city of St. Louis, where it sold like hot cakes. Eventually, over one million copies were sold nationwide. Everyone was humming, singing and dancing to the “Maple Leaf Rag”. This is how he became the King Rag.

Buoyed by the success of “Maple Leaf Rag” and a growing national reputation, Joplin moved to St. Louis in the spring of 1900 with his new wife, Belle. While living there between 1900-1903, he produced some of his better known compositions: The Entertainer, Elite Syncopations, March Majestic and Ragtime Dance. With royalties coming in from his musical creations, he began to perform less and became more of a teacher and composer. During this productive time in St. Louis, Joplin also wrote his first major serious composition, an operatic piece called A Guest of Honor, which had as its setting the Missouri governor’s mansion in Jefferson City. The original score for this work was lost, and it can no longer be performed.

In 1907, Joplin moved to New York to increase national recognition and further his success. He spent the last 10 years of his life working on his opera Treemonisha. This was the first American opera. At the time, no one would publish it or perform it. The story was about a black girl who grew up to overcome slavery and white theaters didn’t feel anyone would come to see it. Scott Joplin tried to produce it himself, but couldn’t find a theater willing to let them perform it. Treemonisha was never performed while Joplin lived. However, Joplin was able to publish the opera.

Following the financial failure of the most ambitious work of his life - his opera Treemonisha - and weakened by a broken spirit and a fatal disease, he died April 1, 1917, at the age of 49. He was buried in a pauper’s grave that remained unmarked until 1974.

His opera Treemonisha was final performed after his death in 1972 and was well received. There was a revived interest in ragtime music with the release of the movie “The Sting” which featured “The Entertainer” throughout the film. (Play track 3)