



Photo 1. Banjo Player Automaton, c. 1895-1900
Adolph Müller, Germany

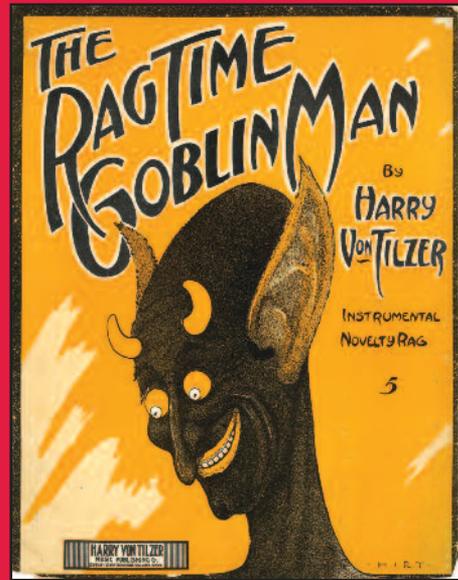


Photo 2. Ragtime Goblin Man, 1911
Harry Von Tilzer, cover by A. Hirt

“Rags, Those Beautiful Rags: Ragtime Music from the Guinness Collection”

by Jere Ryder

The Morris Museum proudly presents its first on-site, spin-off exhibition utilizing objects from the Murtoth D. Guinness Collection. It opened on June 20th and will run until November 10, 2013, and then in 2014 it will be offered as a traveling exhibit to other institutional venues.

ever, knew of his passion for ragtime. Behind those many cabinet doors in multiple rooms, were stored close to 5000 music rolls, books, discs and cylinders, the “media” aspect of his vast collection.

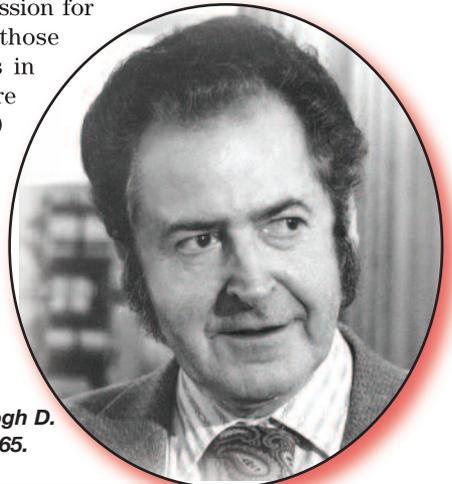


Photo 5. Murtoth D. Guinness, c.1965.



Photos 3 & 4. Partial exhibit views.

Some of the Society’s members may fondly recall visiting the New York City residence of Murtoth Guinness. It was always an adventure and one that would leave lasting memories as there was so much to see and hear. Once the doors opened, you knew there was no way to take it all in during one visit. Few how-





Photo 6. Corner of one collection room, c.1980.

The roll collection itself, spoke volumes to this passion. He could not only play ragtime by hand on the piano, but he collected some of the scarce original rolls and also subscribed to numerous Ragtime & Jazz roll re-cut projects during his collecting days. In addition, he had amassed a respectable collection of period ragtime sheet music. This all became the inspiration for creating this subject-focused exhibition, one in which the public would not only be exposed to the origins of ragtime, but see and hear this history via the period sheet music as well as the mechanical musical instruments that brought it directly to the masses.

This article generally follows the outline and educational content that accompanies the exhibit, and it's all about Ragtime – that musical craze that swept America in the 1890s. This distinctly American genre of music developed from African-American folk songs and plantation banjo tunes, which spread across the nation, then around the world with the assistance of musical boxes, automatic pianos, street organs and some of the first published sheet music. It captured a time in history when Americans were grappling with changing industrial society, and it forever changed the way we listen to music and how the music industry would meet that demand. One of its core musical features is a syncopated or 'ragged' melody, the origins of which date back to at least the mid 1800s. Ragtime's later progression and popularity represented the beginning of a recurring theme, the assimilation of black folk music by national popular music.

The essential component of ragtime is in having a syncopated or 'ragged' melody and a bass beat. It is a musical composition in duple, or double meter, and contains a syncopated treble lead over a rhythmically steady bass. A typical tune is composed of three or four sections, each being 16 or 32 measures in length. The term 'ragtime' was first used in print in 1896-97, and it is derived from a "misplaced" beat or "ragged time," a style of banjo or piano playing in which the melody is broken up into short rhythms while an underlying beat continues. It fascinated and captivated the public by its risky, adventurous 'feel', that many with traditional values called dangerous and would not allow to be played in their homes, let alone public spaces.

The Banjo and Ragtime - Timely Partners:

The chant, songs and dance of native societies in early, West Africa commanded instruments to accompany the tunes.

Hand-strummed instruments, - the ngon, the xalam, the akonting and others, - were crafted from handily available, organic materials. By the late 17th century, this effort transported itself to African slaves in colonial Hispaniola who had developed and were known to have played three-to-five string instruments made of gourd with a membrane cover, a stick-type neck and strings formed from either horse hair or peeled stalks. The sound of these instruments accompanied Black folk song and dance throughout the 18th century, but it wasn't until the 1840s that most 'outsiders' would likely have noticed the previously undocumented, syncopated rhythm, which was being selectively incorporated into traditional song.

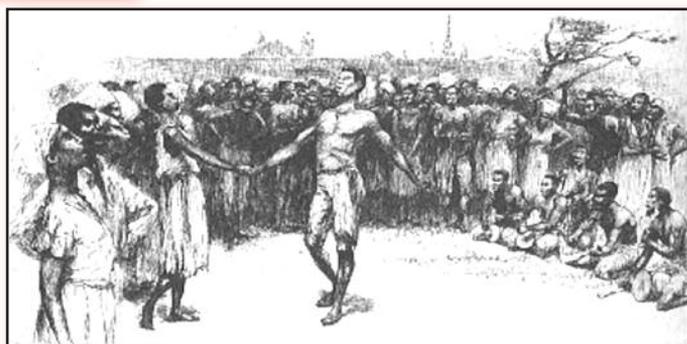


Photo 7. Congo Square, New Orleans, late 1700s.

According to some accounts, it was in the late 1830's that Louis Moreau Gottschalk (b. 1829) started visiting African-American musical performances at 'Congo Square' in New Orleans. A child prodigy musician and composer, Gottschalk eventually moved to Paris and became famous in 1845 for his classical music concerts, but the memories of the "ragged" music of The Crescent City never left his mind. It was thus that in 1848, while living in the French countryside with his family, he composed what is widely considered the first example of a tune incorporating those syncopated rhythms, "Bamboula, Danse des Negres" (Op.2, RO 20), which he later included in many of his concert visits to Spain and Switzerland. This may well be how the Swiss musical box makers were exposed to the tune and sought to transpose it onto their cylinders.

It so happens that MBSI-member Olin Tillotson long ago discovered a rare, key-wind musical box made by Lecoultre in 1852, and it features "Bamboula" as the first of six tunes. Olin and Brenda Tillotson very kindly provided us with photos as well as



Photo 8. Lecoultre keywind (ser.#25572).

an audio recording of this instrument. This may well be the earliest, surviving sound performance, - i.e. document, - of the milestone tune. We are grateful to the Tillotsons and honored to share it with the public by virtue of the audio stations in this exhibition.

These peculiar, “ragged” rhythms soon transcended territorial as well as societal boundaries, with larger audiences listening to solos on banjo in traveling shows. Accordingly, the design of the banjo became sturdier, incorporating steel strings, frets, resonators to amplify, and the fifth string a norm, such that a louder, more strident sound could project to a larger audience. It became the familiar form that we know today as the American banjo.

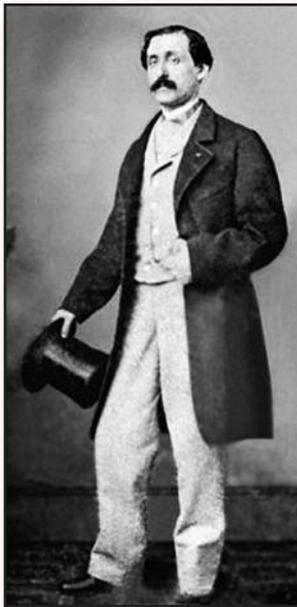


Photo 9. Louis Moreau Gottschalk, c.1860.

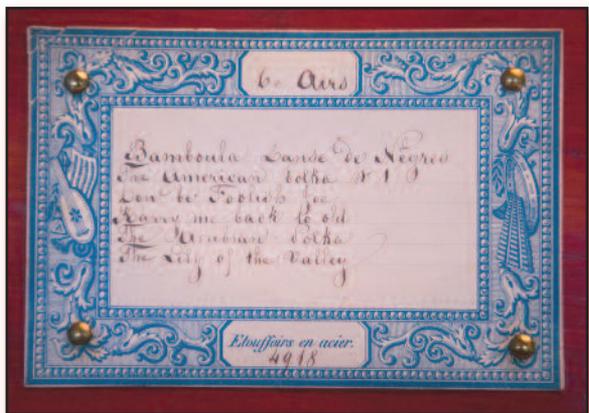


Photo 10. Lecoultre program card.

Before and after the Civil War, itinerant musicians and minstrel performers traveled across the country and even to Europe, introducing those ‘ragged’ melodies to an uninitiated but mesmerized public, utilizing three instruments of preference; the banjo, the tambourine and a set of ‘bones’. But it would be 40 years before the term ‘Ragtime’ would first be coined. Following the Civil War, professional entertainers or performers increased dramatically and would draw a broader, musically exposed audience.

The Player Piano in America: 1890-1925

During the Victorian era, piano instruction had become an essential part of upbringing and education. Men and women had very specific “roles” or spheres of familial duties. A woman’s sphere was the home; she was responsible for social stability, morality, and culture. If you could play the piano, it was perceived you were a cultivated woman, even if you could-

n’t play that well. In 1869, the influential household manual *The American Woman’s Home* instructed families to provide space in the parlor for the piano.^a An expanding upper and middle class had the money and leisure time to explore and support the arts, thus we see an increase of more formal music appreciation by the masses. Music, it was thought, along with other art forms, could counteract the evils of industrialization.

With this as background, three truly amazing, technological refinements arrived, – the player piano, the phonograph and the moving picture – which conspired together to help popularize a widening array of musical genres. People no longer had to learn to perform music themselves, because now it could more simply be purchased and readily consumed.

The early versions of piano ‘player’ mechanisms were encased in a handsome cabinet which would be rolled into place against the keyboard of a regular piano and would use an air-system to “read” the paper roll and mechanically depress the keys of a standard piano keyboard. Not long thereafter, these player mechanisms were integrated into the piano itself, thus becoming what we know today as the Player Piano. Manual foot-pumping was eventually replaced by an electric drive motor, and the experience in either instance was as much visual as musical, with the movement of the paper



Photo 11. Gulbransen, “Saturday Evening Post,” 1918.

roll enhanced by the movement of the ivory keys, as if invisible hands were at play.

Another entire segment of production was aimed separately at public venues such as arcades, soda fountains, taverns, restaurants, resorts and hotel lobbies, – music for the drop of a coin. There were seemingly hundreds of



Photo 12. “The American Player Piano,” 1920.

American brands, models, advertisers and marketers; some of the larger amongst them was Rudolph Wurlitzer and the J.P. Seeburg companies. Through these instruments, ragtime selections were integrated amongst the popular tunes on a given music roll, and in some instances, there would be a roll dedicated to ragtime music itself, comprising up to perhaps ten different rags by various artists.

Society and Tin Pan Alley

The expanding middle class of the late 19th century benefited from the fruits of industrialization, now having a bit more money and leisure time to explore and support the arts, which led to a growing appreciation of music. The public's growing appreciation of music prompted further advancements in piano design and manufacture. Increasing production numbers made for better affordability, which in turn encouraged music as well as other art forms to fulfill intellectual needs.

Composers and the new music publishing businesses, known collectively as Tin Pan Alley, took commercial advantage of this phenomenon. To create a steady stream of saleable sheet music, they supplemented the classical standards with popular and original tunes.



Photo 13. Tin Pan Alley (5th & 28th St., NYC), c.1910.

The huge ragtime push was 'on', and Ben Harney was one of its leaders. In 1918, Harney publically "offered to leave the profession and forfeit one hundred dollars if anyone could submit a rag predating his own ragtime songs, the earliest being 'You've Been A Good Old Wagon But You've Done Broke Down' (1895) and 'Mister Johnson, Turn Me Loose' (1896).^{7b} He also published the first ragtime piano primer, "The Ragtime Instructor," in 1897, which was extremely successful.

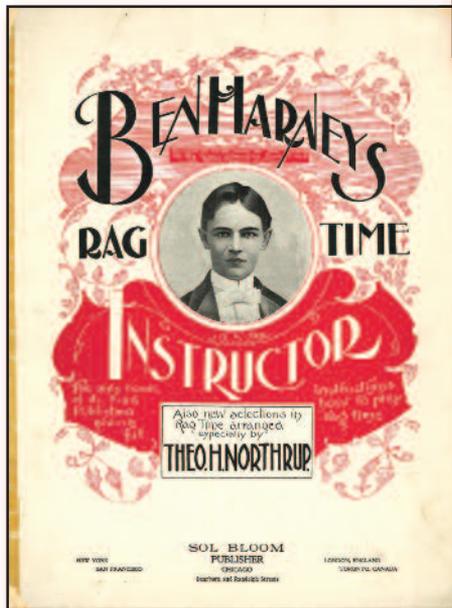


Photo 14. "The Ragtime Instructor," Ben Harney, 1897.

Astute publishing houses knew that, in addition to the lines of music contained within, attractive and appealing cover art was just as much a part of sales. Graphic artists were in high demand, and it was an extremely competitive industry. The exhibit highlights a select but impressive array from the hands of talented cover artists, including



Photo 15. A Black Smoke, C. L. Johnson, cover by H.T. Slaughter, 1902.

William and Frederick Starmer, André De Takacs, Joseph Hirt, John Frew, Walter Dittmar, James Dulin, et al. Selling more sheet music was the business, and illustrators such as these were masters of their craft.



Photo 16. Sheet music cover artist at work, c.1910.

By 1910, ragtime had lost most of its sinful implications, but it also was losing a major portion of its association with black musicians as well. Middle-class America

had readily adopted the music into its social life, and white composers offered-up their own renditions, and New York's Tin Pan Alley sheet music publishers developed it into big business.



Photo 17. "That Beautiful Rag," Irving Berlin, cover by John Frew, 1910.

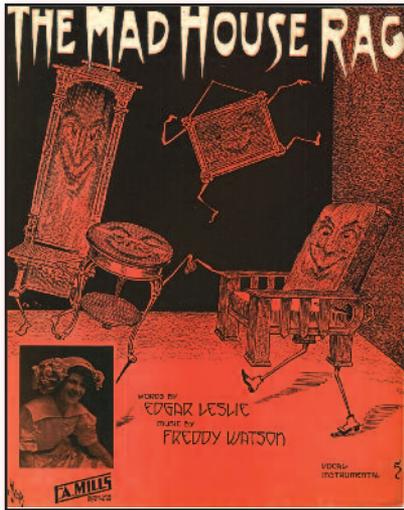


Photo 18. "The Mad House Rag," Freddy Watson, cover by De Takas, 1911.

The Role of Automatic Musical Instruments

Since the inception of automatic musical instruments, the key goal was to have the ability to hear at will, anytime, a melody of one's choosing. It should be a performance of quality which at minimum imitates in an acceptable fashion, and at best replicates as closely as possible, that of hearing a live performance by the most talented of artists. The peak of the ragtime craze happened to coincide with several changes within the mechanical music industry that turned their products into prime vehicles for conveying rag tunes to those who desired it. This development was encouraged by the music publishers of

Tin Pan Alley, who could derive the benefit of sheet music sales from those who had already heard the latest tunes. The syncopated music made its way onto devices built for outdoor as well as indoor use, and it showed up on the very last of the 'golden era' musical boxes.



Photo 19. Olympia, 15 1/2" disc musical box, F. G. Otto & Sons, c.1898.

Organ grinders were a part of this marketing blitz, and an episode involving builder Giuseppe Molinari provides us with a snapshot of the time. During the Victor Herbert trials in 1902 pertaining to music rights (pre-ASCAP), Molinari traveled from

New York to Pittsburgh to testify. He produced a two-foot tall stack of newly issued sheet music, representative of what was regularly delivered to him by publishers and composers that wanted their rags to be pinned onto street organs



Photo 20. Organ Grinder, East side NYC, c.1920.

just prior to when the sheet music would go on sale. Molinari relayed that while a thousand people might hear the new pieces in a theatre or hall, he could within a week pin the same tunes onto organ cylinders that millions would hear. Molinari said, "There are thousands of people who like music who will throw pennies to an organ grinder but can't afford to spend money for regular concerts or shows... the orchestra gives it to a handful in the hall, but the 'grinder' gives it to the entire town!"^c

Two rarified instruments built for public use at indoor locations were the Wurlitzer Automatic Harp and the "Encore" Automatic Banjo, each which are shown in this exhibition and played rags and other tunes by means of mechanical "fingers" to pluck the strings. Coin-operated, cylinder phono-



Photo 21. Encore Automatic Banjo, American Automusic Co., 1901.



Photo 22. Wurlitzer Automatic Harp, J. W. Whitlock Co., 1905-07.

graphs were a common sight in arcades, but the Regina Hexaphone was quite a unique forerunner of the jukebox. The clock-work-driven device contained six Edison cylinders and any particular tune could be selected at will.



Photo 23. Regina Hexaphone, Regina Company, 1917.

The shift in public attention from music in the home to entertainment on main street took a toll on the traditional musical box makers, but not entirely. As phonograph sales out-paced musical boxes, the few remaining cylinder box makers in Ste-Croix welcomed a fresh musical format with which to intrigue their customers. The Regina company's discs, made for both home and public amusement, featured Rags, Cake Walks, Two-Steps and the like. And even the European automaton makers found the classic Banjo-player figure too irresistible a subject not to realize.

In Closing:

Ragtime quietly faded into the background as World War I and the public's musical taste evolved into jazz and other forms that found their roots in ragtime. Even so, and for those wanting to recapture happier, possibly more leisurely days, ragtime tunes would linger for perhaps another decade on automatic musical instruments that could be still found in soda fountains, taverns, restaurants, hotel lobbies, arcades and the like.

This exhibition features several audio- or listening-stations that offer rags from the subject instruments, spanning the range from 1852 to 1927. Not bad for 75 years of syncopation! There are also, periodic public demonstrations of the instruments. Please come visit and enjoy!

Appreciation is extended to the entire exhibition team:

- Linda S. Moore, Morris Museum Executive Director
- Jere Ryder, Conservator of the Guinness Collection
- Michele Marinelli, Curator of the Guinness Collection
- Kelly McCartney, former Curator of the Guinness Collection
- Kathy Haviland, Custom Matting and Framing
- Angela Sergonis, Graphic Design
- Stephen H. Ryder, Researcher and Editor
- Glenn Grabinsky, Historical Researchers
- Edward A. Berlin, Richard Dutton and Robbie Rhodes of Mechanical Music Digest, Tune Identification

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- 8 & 10 – Brenda Tillotson
- 21 – Tim Volk
- 7 - E. W. Kemble's, *The Bamboula*, drawing of Congo Square, *Century Magazine*, 1886
- 13 & 14 – www.parlorsongs.com
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Footnotes:

- ^a Roell, Craig H., *The Piano in America*, 1890-1940, pg. 22, The University of North Carolina Press, 1989
- ^b Berlin, pg.49
- ^c *The Pittsburgh Press*, pg. 16, Nov. 14, 1902

www.morrismuseum.org

