Piano Styles: Ragtime to Boogie-Woogie

MUH 2116 Evolution of Jazz
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The Birth of Ragtime

Different views about Ragtime:

- Is Ragtime jazz or not?
- Ragtime - essential to jazz-”improvisatory feel” but not improvised – hence *not Jazz but rather a forerunner of Jazz*

Ragtime development

- Pianists not used in Dixieland band - they developed a solo style of playing piano
- A piano player was hired in place of a six or seven-piece band, forcing the player to develop a technique that provided a full sound
  - Left hand-bass notes & chords; right hand-highly syncopated melodic lines
Ragtime

By the end of 1800 Ragtime became very popular in New Orleans. “Rag” referred to a kind of music that sounded like a military march & rhythms borrowed from African-American banjo music. To “Rag” meant to syncopate.

Influence of the Ragtime

Some consider Ragtime the first jazz style, although involved only limited improvisation. It was through-composed. Ragtime is consider the forerunner of Jazz.
Ragtime

Publishing Rags

- Tin Pan Alley (New York)

- “Rags” too difficult for the amateur pianists, had to be simplified

- “Harlem Rag” (1897) the first rag ever published

- Controversy about who composed what rag

- “Cutting” contests
  - A clip from “The Legend of 1900”, a “cutting contest” between 1900 (the main character) and Jelly Roll Morton. (1900 is a fictitious character)

- Rag composed in a definite format showing European influence
Scott Joplin

- The most prolific composer of ragtime music
  - Known as the “king of ragtime”
  - Schooled musician
  - Published about fifty rags (some say he composed 600)

*Maple Leaf Rag*
- The most famous Rag-sold hundreds of thousands of copies in the first ten years

*The Entertainer* - One of the classics of ragtime, it returned to top international prominence as part of the ragtime revival in the 1970s when it was used as the theme music for the 1973 Oscar-winning film *The Sting.*
Jelly Roll Morton

- The best-known ragtime piano player
- Piano-arranger-composer; possibly the first jazz composer
- His arranging practices for small groups were imitated by early big bands
- Claims that he originated jazz in 1902, as well ragtime, swing and just about everything in this area

- **Maple Leaf Rag** — Jelly Roll plays it with a different interpretation, embellishments and swing feel
Ragtime & Dixieland Merge

Piano players began to play with other musicians - the two styles - Dixieland and Ragtime, began to merge

- Band recordings of rag tunes typically performed by pianists

Results from the merging

- Basic melodic concept of the rags was changed
- The rhythmic accentuation typical to the rags was carried over into Dixieland jazz
- The result was a new repertoire to the music of the jazz bands - rags with altered form; from 2/4 to 4/4
Stride Piano

- Stride piano - also known as New York ragtime
- The distinctive technique was originated in Harlem during World War I
- The name "stride" comes from the left-hand movement "striding" up and down the keyboard.
- Stride is one of the most difficult styles of jazz piano playing, takes years to master, and is often confused with other jazz piano where the left hand alternates. One does not play "some" stride, but plays a full several minute piece in the idiom, with many variations along the melodic line.
- The pianist's left hand may play a four-beat pulse with a bass note on the first and third beats, and a chord on the second and fourth beats, or an interrupted bass with three single notes and then a chord while the right hand plays melodies, riffs and often contrapuntal lines. Pedal technique further varies the left hand sound.
Stride Piano

- Stride piano - an extension of ragtime
  - It was partially influenced by ragtime but as a jazz piano idiom
  - Piano players no longer compelled to play alone
  - Features improvisation, blue notes, and swing rhythms which its predecessor did not.
  - Piano was considered a part of the jazz band
  - Increased tempos
    - The relax feeling of the ragtime gave way to the virtuoso displays and improvisation not present in early ragtime
Stride Piano

Differences between stride piano playing and ragtime

- Stride player not concerned with Ragtime form
  - They played popular tunes of the day and any other kind of music that appealed to them
- The original ragtime - composed; stride players were often very proficient improvisers
- The feeling of stride music was intense - pianists played faster and with much more drive than the more relaxed ragtime players
Great Stride Piano Players

James P. Johnson

- One of the originators of the stride style of jazz piano playing.

- "The Father" of Stride Piano
- "Charleston" - became one of the most popular tunes and arguably the definitive dance number of the Roaring 1920s.
Great Stride Piano Players

🌟 Thomas “Fats” Waller

- One of the most popular performers of his era and most entertaining and exciting stride piano player.
- Critical and commercial success in his homeland and in Europe.
- Student of James P. Johnson
- A prolific songwriter, with many songs he wrote or co-wrote still known to modern audiences
- Sold many of his compositions for relatively small sums, and as they became hits, other songwriters had already claimed them as their own. Thus many standards are alternatively, controversially attributed to Waller.
Great Stride Piano Players

Art Tatum

- His recordings are still some of the best stride piano
- "God is in the house" remark made by Waller when Tatum entered a club where Waller was playing
- Most versatile piano player in the history of jazz
- Almost completely blind
-Introduced advanced harmonies into jazz
- One of the most influential jazz musicians of all times

Art Tatum

Received a Grammy Award from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (1974)
Boogie-Woogie

Characteristics

- The origin of the term boogie-woogie is unknown
- Came into prominence during the Great Depression (early 1930s)
- Jazz faced a situation in which a full style of piano playing was needed as a substitute for hiring a band
- Left hand-ostinato (short musical pattern repeated throughout); right hand- improvising without strongly defined melody, emphasis on melodic blues licks (patterns).
- Syncopation & polyrhythms, fast tempos
- Originated as solo piano style and was extended from piano, to three pianos at once, guitar, big band, and country and western music, and even gospel.
- Whilst the blues traditionally depicts sadness and sorrow, boogie-woogie is associated with dancing.
Important Boogie-Woogie Performers

- **Albert Ammons**
  - “The King of Boogie-Woogie”

- **Pete Johnson**
  - Albert Ammons & Pete Johnson “Boogie Woogie Dream”

- **Meade “Lux” Lewis**
  - “Bush Street Boogie”
  - “Honky Tonk Train Blues” - his best known work
  - “Piano Boogie” - notice the “Rock ‘n Roll” bass line
  - Meade Lux Lewis - Boogie Woogie