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Brooklyn's Classic Ragtimer

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Among ragtime aficionados, “The Big Three of Classic Ragtime”—Scott Joplin (ca. 1867-1917), James Scott (1885-1938), and Joseph F. Lamb (1887-1960)—are among the most highly esteemed, and Brooklyn was the home of the last named of this trio. All three were published by John Stark, in Missouri and New York. But for Lamb, unlike the other two, music was primarily an avocation given that his career as a professional musician lasted less than a year. Lamb made his living as a manager in a major dry goods and finance company, composing music purely for personal satisfaction.

Born in New Jersey, where he was taught piano by two older sisters, he began composing and publishing as an adolescent while attending a Catholic prep school and seminary in Canada. He finished school at sixteen (in 1903) and, putting aside his plans to attend college and study engineering, returned home to New Jersey and commuted to Manhattan where he found employment as an office boy. He continued composing, and being in New York afforded him the opportunity of buying sheet music directly from publishers. He frequently visited the office of John Stark, and it was there, in 1907 or 1908, that he had his momentous meeting with his favorite composer, Scott Joplin. The meeting led to friendship and Joplin, impressed by the young man's compositions, prevailed upon Stark to publish him. From 1908 through 1919, Stark brought out a dozen rags by Lamb, these forming the basis of his renown.

In 1910, Lamb had his only regular employment as a musician, working for ten months as a song plugger and arranger for a small publisher. He afterwards continued as an arranger on a freelance basis. He married in 1911, moved to Brooklyn, and soon found employment in the dry goods and finance industry, where he remained the rest of his working life. In the early 1920s, when Stark's publishing business was winding down, Lamb submitted another dozen or so piano pieces to Mills Music, but they were never published and were presumed lost.



Joseph F. Lamb

For the next quarter-century, music remained a hobby for Lamb; he entertained his friends and composed for church minstrel shows. In 1949, he was lifted from obscurity by Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, who were researching the ragtime era and locating surviving figures from the period. They were surprised Lamb was not a black Midwesterner, but a white, Irish resident of Brooklyn; Lamb was astonished that anyone was interested in the ragtime he had composed decades earlier. After publication of the Blesh/Janis book *They All Played Ragtime* (1950) Lamb enjoyed a fame unlike anything he had experienced during his more active ragtime years. Ragtime aficionados visited and corresponded with him, interviewed and recorded him, featured him at festivals, and urged him to return to composing ragtime. He loved the attention.

Brooklyn's Classic Ragtimer (cont.)

In 1964, after Lamb's death, Belwin Mills came out with a folio of thirteen rags, consisting of new pieces and unpublished rags from earlier years. More recently, additional rags and non-rags, supplied by his family, were published by Ragtime Press. Amazingly, three pieces that he had sold to Mills Music in the 1920s have recently been discovered among boxes of discarded manuscripts. At the time of this writing, more than sixty of Lamb's piano pieces and songs have been published.

Carol J. Binkowski, a church organist and author of several books on music, became fascinated by Lamb's music and concluded there was a need for a biography. Others had approached the subject before her: Marjorie Freilich-Den had written the master's thesis "Joseph F. Lamb: A Ragtime Composer Recalled" (Brooklyn College, 1975), and Joseph R. Scotti wrote the Ph.D. dissertation "Joe Lamb: A Study of Ragtime's Paradox" (University of Cincinnati, 1977). Scotti passed away before he could convert his dissertation to a book, but his widow gave Binkowski access to his notes. In addition to these academic works, Binkowski had the active cooperation and encouragement of Lamb's children and other family members and friends, and access to extensive correspondence between Lamb and ragtime enthusiasts. The result, *Joseph F. Lamb: A Passion for Ragtime* (McFarland, 2012), is an impressive and meticulously researched work. She depicts the complexities of his personality, traces the details and minutiae of his life, and reveals his collaboration with obscure lyricists and the small, long-defunct music publishers who issued his early compositions.

Binkowski focuses on Lamb's life, the circumstances of his compositions, his responses to music, and his reactions to hearing his music performed by others, ranging from amateur piano renditions to street and park band concerts. While she writes enthusiastically about his life and influences, she falters when discussing Lamb's music. As his music is the reason for our interest in his life, we are struck by the absence of a single music example. Binkowski cites titles, dates, and circumstances of composition. In some cases she identifies prominent features of the music, but never shows us why a feature is worth mentioning. She speaks of his early pieces and of the interesting

syncopation that foreshadows his eventual move to ragtime, but the absence of an illustration leaves us wondering whether the context supports her opinion. She refers to a letter in which Lamb discusses why some band performances of his music succeed and others fail, and why certain rags lend themselves to ensemble arrangements whereas others are less adaptable. This potentially rich subject, dwelling on his perceptions of ragtime and its performance, is abandoned after only seventeen lines. She is convincing in her appraisal of Lamb's harmonies, but the reader should have a sample of the evidence. Insufficient attention to the music is also responsible for a minor error: she dates a photo of Lamb and two friends to 1908, but the published sheet music visible on the piano in the background, and more clearly on the book's glossy cover, is Lamb's *Top Liner Rag*, from 1916.

This book is, by far, the most complete and authoritative account we have of Joseph Lamb's life. The scrupulous research documents and highlights significant features that might have been overlooked by a less thorough biographer. Readers might appreciate greater attention to the actual music, but this shortcoming does not negate the substantial accomplishment in charting the life of one of ragtime's greatest composers.