America, Ireland, and England has come out on Folkways, and other individuals have announced tentative plans for reissuing more of his material. Though this music will never attain the large audience attracted by other "rediscovered" American folk-musics, it is certainly deserving of a greater share of public attention. As far as serving as an introduction to the traditional music of Ireland, these two albums of Michael Coleman's music may not be representative of all traditional Irish music, but they are certainly representative of some of the finest music that tradition has to offer.

**NOTES**


Ragtime Piano Originals. 16 piano solos by Mike Bernard, Frank Banta, Jean Laques, and others, compiled and with notes by David A. Jasen, mono. Folkways records NF 23, 701 Seventh Avenue, New York, New York. 13036. 1974. $6.98.

Ragtime Entertainment. 16 instrumental and vocal selections by El Cota, Gene Greene, Conway's Band, Tyror's Band, and others, compiled and with notes by David A. Jasen, mono. NBP records 22 as above. $6.98.

Reviewed by Bill Long.

The word "ragtime" has been applied at one time or another to a bewildering variety of music. The current ragtime revival has centered on the music of Scott Joplin and, to a lesser extent, that of Joplin's colleagues and proteges such as Tom Turpin, James Scott, and Joe Lamb. This music, composed during the first decade or so of the century, was the first music actually called ragtime to attract general public attention. It is often called "classic ragtime" or "St. Louis ragtime."

But there were other kinds of ragtime. In his discography, Recorded Ragtime 1897-1956, David Jasen distinguishes eight distinct ragtime styles. The most successful and durable of these styles was "novelty ragtime."

The differences between novelty and classic ragtime styles sprang directly from the motivations of the composers themselves. Joplin's model in his compositions was classical music, though his basic materials were of folk origin. His classical orientation is demonstrated by his attempts to extend the ragtime idiom, most notably in his two operas. Though undoubtedly gratified when one of his compositions became a hit, the classic ragtime writer's fundamental commitment was to write what Joplin called "genuine Negro ragtime." As Joe Lamb said, "I didn't want to make my money on my things. I only wanted to see them published because my dream was to be a great ragtime composer."
The novelty ragtime composers reversed Lamb's priorities. To produce a successful commodity they appropriated the most striking features of classic ragtime and combined them with elements of the popular music of the day. The result was a flashy syncopated music which was more accessible to the general public than classic ragtime. Its salient characteristic was its emphasis on rhythm, the left hand being allowed to syncopate to a degree unheard of in classic ragtime and often whole sections of a composition being devoted solely to the execution of complicated rhythmic patterns. The melodies were much less inventive than in classic ragtime, harmonies being simplified accordingly along with formal organization. And always there was the search for an attention grabbing novelty element, an especially tricky rhythm or surprising harmony, interpolation of a folk tune or classical melody, or, if all else failed, a performance utilizing a dazzling speed technique. As John Stark, the great rag publisher, lamented, "The pieces that rage at picture shows and cafes are songs with a catch phrase or an imitation of dog barks, cat calls, or auto and boat whistles..."

Unlike classic ragtime which was disseminated only through sheet music and piano rolls (mostly of the arranged rather than hand-played variety), many disc recordings of novelty ragtime were made and sold during its heyday. In these two recordings David Jasen has compiled a generous selection of novelty rags taken from rare vintage recordings.

The more interesting of the recordings by far is Ragtime Piano Originals. Ragtime is basically a pianist's art and on this disc we hear fifteen different performers playing their own music. The recordings range in date from 1913 to 1929, all but four of them from the middle to late twenties.

The best known performer here is Mike Bernard. Bernard was a veteran of the vaudeville circuit and perennial victor in ragtime contests. His conservatory acquired technique is displayed in "Blaze Away," an Abe Holmesman composition, and in Bernard's collaboration with Sol Violinsky "Tantalizing Tingles." The rhythmic and melodic subtleties of Joplin or Lamb would have been destroyed by such rapid tempos, but the rags Bernard has chosen hold up well enough and must have impressed his audience. Much of the stereotype of the ragtime pianist as sleeve-gartered virtuoso of the tack-hammer upright must go back to Bernard's performances. It is probably more than coincidence that one of the strains of Johnny Maddox's "Crazy Otto" was taken from "Blaze Away."

Most of the other performers on this disc share Bernard's basic approach to ragtime, but several cuts deserve special mention. "Unknown Rag," an untitled piece played by an unidentified pianist, starts promisingly with a few measures in tango rhythm
reminiscent of Pickett's "Dream Rag" or Matthews' "Pastime Rag," though it quickly reverts to the rhythmic and melodic filigree characteristic of novelty ragtime. Larry Thomas's "A Classical Span" skillfully interpolates portions of compositions by Charwenka and Radzewski. This was a common novelty device and it works well enough here to make Thomas's rag a worthy companion to Cobb's well known "Russian Rag" which borrows from Rachmaninoff in similar fashion. Kube Bloom has picked a more unusual novelty gimmick in "That Futuristic Rag." Passages built on the whole tone scale introduce the rag and recur throughout. This must have seemed suitably shocking to that portion of his audience which still considered Lebussey avant garde, though I wonder how many such naïfs still existed in 1926 when the record was released. My personal favorite from this set is Joseph Ballen's "Nigger's Hop." It seems to be a throwback to classic ragtime or to even earlier cakewalk styles. Its cake-walk feel is enhanced by Batten's choice of a moderate tempo.

Though most rags were originally piano solos and make their best effect in that format, ragtime was performed on every conceivable instrument with varying degrees of success. In order to increase the number of potential customers, publishers routinely issued rags in instrumental versions as well as for solo piano, the more common ensembles being small and large orchestra, wind band, and string band, though more bizarre groupings were often encountered. Yet some portion of the market remain untapped, a sizeable repertoire of ragtime songs was available to vocalists. (In a few cases even these were arrangements of piano rags.) Frequently these numbers were taken from the repertoire of successful vaudeville artists. In fact many of the arrangements of rags were made to accommodate the entertainment industry, either as vehicles for featured soloists or ensembles, or as background or intermission music, a sort of sprightly ancestor of hokum.

Ragtime entertainment gives us a sampling of instrumental and vocal ragtime in recordings which date from 1902 to 1922. Side one consists of ragtime performed by a great variety of soloists. The earliest recording here is "Ragtime Skedaddle" played on the piccolo by George Schweinfest. Though Schweinfe's pianist would seem to have little feel for the new-fangled syncopations, the piano sound is reproduced well enough to show that recordings of piano ragtime were at least technically possible as early as 1902. The best known rag on this side is Botsford's "Black and White Rag" performed by a xylophone virtuoso billed as El Cota, with instrumental accompaniment. The rag works well in this format, one frequently encountered in recorded ragtime. Gene Greene's "King of the Bungaloos" is an example of the coon song, a form not likely to have a revival in the near future. The song includes an excellent performance of a "jig chorus" in which the melody is sung to a set of nonsense syllables, rather like the scat singing which was to come much later.
The other cuts on side one feature solos on mandolin, drums, saxophone, and hurdy-gurdy(!), and a saxophone ensemble, all of which have a novelty appeal which quickly wears thin on repetition. Much the same may be said of the selections on the second side of the recording which is devoted to military band ragtime. Though the organizations represented here are first rate, the elan of ragtime is largely lost when interpreted through so much musical firepower. The little known "Bantam Step" by Larry Jentes emerges as a highly original rag in this performance by Conway's band, but most of the pieces consist of a few rudimentary and brittle syncopations superimposed on routine tonic-dominant harmonies. Even Henry Lodge's "Pastime Rag" undergoes rigor mortis when transferred to the band idiom.

The sound on the discs is what one would expect from old and well-loved, often-played recordings. The reproduction is acceptable, although occasionally marred by obtrusive surface noise, especially during some of the piano selections. The producers have sensibly decided against electronically tinkering with the output of the old discs.

A major flaw in these productions is the inadequacy of the annotation. The situation is worst in Ragtime Piano Originals. We are not given recording locations or dates, release dates, nor even a general idea of the time period spanned by the selection of discs. The notes for Ragtime Entertainment are somewhat better, recording dates being given for several, but not all, of the performances. But the recording company which issued the original record numbers are never given. Such omissions would be hard to forgive in any historical collection, but are especially so in one compiled by David Jasen who has written the definitive ragtime discography.

Reviews by Michael Taft:


Blues Classics has once again produced an album of songs by the Victor Bluebird recording artist, John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson. This bluesman was an important figure in the Chicago blues scene.