J. Russel Robinson, "The White Man with Colored Fingers"

J. Russel Robinson has been undeservedly neglected by historians of American music. He was one of the most multi-talented figures in popular music, having made a mark as a songwriter, as a composer of ragtime, jazz, and blues, and as a vaudeville, piano roll, and phonorecord artist. Moreover, he so mastered Afro-American musical idioms that black songwriter Spencer Williams called him "the white man with colored fingers."

Robinson was born in Indianapolis on 8 July 1892, and must be considered one of the major popular songwriters from Indiana, ranking with Hoagy Carmichael, Cole Porter, Paul Dresser, and more recently, Michael Jackson. He essentially taught himself piano, and when still a teenager, teamed with brother John, a drummer, to play in the silent movie theaters of Indianapolis. Dropping out of high school, "The Famous Robinson Brothers" headed South for a grand tour of movie theaters. In Macon, Georgia, he wrote his first rag, "Sapho Rag," at the age of fifteen and sold it by mail to John Stark, the major publisher of Scott Joplin. Robinson wrote more than a dozen other ragtime pieces, songs, and instrumentals including "The Minstrel Man" (1910) and "That Eccentric Rag" (1912). During the 1910s, he performed in Anderson and Indianapolis, Indiana, and played in vaudeville with his wife, singer Marguerite Kendall.

As a child Robinson had been afflicted with polio in his left arm, and so he compensated by devising "gymnastic and unorthodox passages" for the left hand. This unusual style appealed to player piano roll executives, who hired Robinson to record dozens of rolls. His excellent rolls for the Imperial, United States Music, and QRS companies are all but forgotten today. Robinson worked in Chicago in the late 1910s, then moved to New York. There he joined the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, an early successful group, and was their pianist from 1919 to 1921. Robinson also worked with W. C. Handy's music firm and wrote lyrics for some of Handy's blues songs. He recorded accompaniments for blues singers such as Lucille Hegamin and Lizzie Miles, and made numerous recordings with Al Bernard as the duo, The Dixie Stars.

As a popular songwriter, Robinson is best-remembered for "Margie," with Con Conrad, an enduring hit from 1920. His "Singin' the Blues (Til My Daddy Comes Home)" (1920) was immortalized in a 1927 recording by cornetist Bix Beiderbecke, and was recently revived in the motion picture *The Cotton Club*. His "Aggravatin' Papa (Don't You Try To Two-Time Me)" (1923) was recorded by Bessie Smith, and Robinson also wrote the popular "A Portrait of Jennie" (1948). To the jazz repertory he contributed "Eccentric," a 1923 reworking of his "That Eccentric Rag." "Eccentric" has become a standard of the traditional jazz repertory.

During the 1930s he was pianist for the "Horn & Hardart Childrens' Hour," a New York City radio program, and in the 1940s he moved to southern California. He found an increasingly smaller market for his songs, but kept committing new material to paper in hopes that it would someday be published. With renewed interest in ragtime in the late 1940s, Robinson's name appeared occasionally in the jazz and ragtime press, but he died in 1963, never having found a market for dozens of his songs.

Robinson's memory and legacy live on today in countless renditions throughout the world of "Margie" and his other songs, and in the small but growing interest in his ragtime works. Six recordings of his rags have been reissued in the double-record set, *Indiana Ragtime* (Indiana Historical Society 1001, 1981), which was co-produced by Frank J. Gillis, Director Emeritus of the Archives of Traditional Music, and the present author. The research supporting the album was conducted from 1979 to 1981 under a grant to the Archives from the Lilly Endowment. Tape-recorded interviews with Robinson's widow, Gertrude Robinson, and other materials relating to his life and music were deposited in the Archives at that time (accession number 80-125-F). It is a fitting addition to the collections to now have the recordings described in the accompanying article, and this gift expands the Archives's already significant holdings of music from Indiana. The Archives of Traditional Music now possesses the largest public collection of materials relating to this gifted musician.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Hasse, John Edward. *Indiana Ragtime: A History and Anthology*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, forthcoming, 1985.

Robinson, J. Russel. "Dixieland Piano," as told to Ralph Auf der Heide. *Record Changer* (August 1947), 7-8, 11.

John Edward Hasse, Curator
Division of Musical Instruments
Smithsonian Institution

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Archives of Traditional Music
Maxwell Hall 057
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana 47405
(812) 335-8632

Anthony Seeger, *Director*
Louise S. Spear, *Associate Director*
Mary E. Russell, *Librarian*
Marilyn B. Graf, *Secretary*