

TurpinTyme Ragtime: A Kansas City Delight

Text and Photos by Bob Lord



The TurpinTyme Ragsters hold forth for the Friends of Scott Joplin at Kiener Plaza, downtown St. Louis, July 1998. From left, Gary Richmond, Greg Briggs, Mark Cohick, Kent Rausch, Dan Strom, and Bill Drybread. Rausch was pinch-hitting for regular drummer Alan Wiley.



Dan Strom also plays with the New Red Onion Jazz Babies.

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In his liner notes to the Stomp Off LP *Smiles and Chuckles (SOS 1007)*, Terry Waldo points out that, during its heyday, ragtime was not just piano music but was also a music of bands and orchestras, a music that could be heard by the public on records and in the theaters. Waldo notes that a surprising number of ragtime compositions really come to life when they are played by a band or an orchestra. Piano alone cannot create the counter melodies and novel percussive effects that are central to the character of the music. Today, Kansas City's TurpinTyme Ragsters are carrying on the tradition of instrumental ragtime.

The TurpinTyme Ragsters, named after the legendary Tom Turpin, were formed in 1993 by Kansas City trumpeter Gary Richmond and have been actively playing ragtime in the Midwest ever since. The group is primarily made up of professional musicians in the Kansas City area. Most of them have made their living for many years by taking as many performance opportunities as possible in what could be described as a small market. Example venues include summer theater, Broadway shows, brass quintets, wedding ceremonies and receptions, and private lessons.

Richmond recalls, "I first put a group together in 1990 for a local theme park. It was a German Band and was a big success. That put me on to the idea of forming other specialty groups, which included the Blue and Gray Brass Brigade that played Civil War era music. After a time, I began to develop an interest in ragtime, and the more I got into it I realized what wonderful music it is."

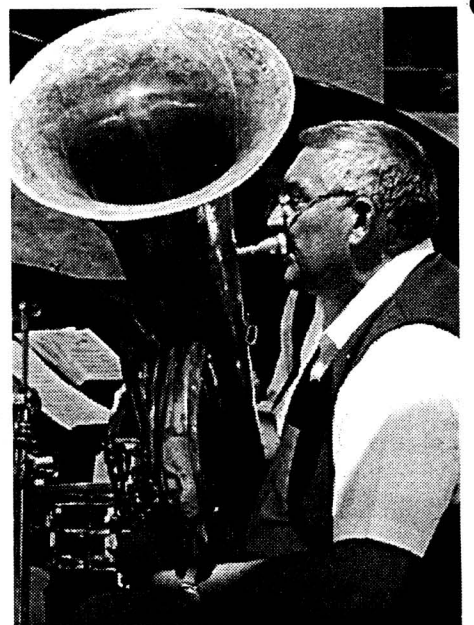
Shortly after the formation of the Ragsters, Richmond fell into a wealth of ragtime arrangements. "A friend of mine mentioned that he thought that the University of Missouri/Kansas City had a music collection department with a few pieces of old sheet music and arrangements. After checking it out, I was overwhelmed. They had about 5,000 arrangements going as far back as 1850! There were about 90 ragtime pieces, and many were by ragtime composers such as Charles Johnson, Joseph Lamb, and James Scott. I was like a babe in a candy store as I went through the collection. They were kind enough to make copies of select items for me. Next, a brief search on the Internet led me to the Hogan Jazz Archives at Tulane



Gary Richmond, of Kansas City, has toured with the Tommy Dorsey and Ray Anthony Orchestras and leads several groups, including a Civil War-era brass band.



Kansas City clarinetist Gregg Briggs, left, is a private instructor at local schools and colleges. Drummer Kent Rausch, here pinch-hitting for band regular Alan Wiley, also drums for Kansas City's Red Onion Babies. Tenor sax man Mark Cohick has frequently toured Europe with American Broadway productions.



Though he plays tuba with the TurpinTyme Ragsters, Bill Drybread has played bass trombone with the Kansas City Symphony for 38 years.

University in New Orleans. I flew down to New Orleans and discovered another treasure trove which I was able to tap into. I've also traded charts with a number of people, including Richard Zimmerman and Fess Blattner. I can't seem to collect enough ragtime music and now have about 250 ragtime arrangements which provide a nice repertoire for our group. I have re-orchestrated most of them for our instrumentation using the 'Coda Finale' software program."

The Ragsters are quite active, playing approximately 50 dates a year. Example venues include the Missouri State Fair, the Trans-Mississippi Festival in Omaha, Nebraska, Worlds of Fun theme park in Kansas City, and a number of city parks, community festivals, and colleges throughout the Midwest. Since many of these engagements can be considered "non-ragtime" events, they frequently have people approach them to learn more about the music. As Richmond relates, "Young people in particular seem to be inquisitive about this ancient (to them) music, and they ask questions about its history. The appeal, of course, is its cheery nature — it's hard to listen to ragtime without tapping your foot or dancing. At one of our concerts in Omaha, a gentleman told me he liked the group and had written some rags himself. A few days later, I received five of them in the mail!"

In June 1997 the Ragsters appeared at the internationally known Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival in Sedalia, Missouri. Richmond says, "That was really a feather in our cap because virtually all the top ragtime performers have appeared at this festival over the years. As we play around the Midwest, we are frequently asked if we have played the Sedalia Joplin Festival, and we're pleased to be able to respond that we have. It was a wonderful experience for us and we look forward to returning."

Many composers from the ragtime era are represented in the group's repertoire but they find Scott Joplin pieces particularly satisfying. "It's hard to beat Scott Joplin's music," points out Richmond, "because of the great

melodies and interesting counter melodies and phrases that are available to spread around the instruments in our group."

The Ragsters have a special fondness for the music of Kansas City ragtime composer Charles L. Johnson. Johnson remained in Kansas City throughout his career and wrote more than 30 rags, with "Dill Pickles Rag" probably being his best known. Richmond notes, "We have a special interest in Johnson's music because of the Kansas City connection, but also because many of his compositions lend themselves to instrumental groups. Johnson rags we play include 'Crazybone Rag,' 'Apple Jack — Some Rag,' and 'All The Money.' I recently read some biographical material on him and realized I've played at some of the same places where he had performed here in Kansas City. Some time back, the *Kansas City Star* did a piece on our group, and a relative of Charles Johnson called to order a couple of our CDs because she wanted to know more about his music."

Richmond describes their sound as concert band music from the 1900s. "I don't call the music we play orchestral ragtime because that connotes to me a symphonic approach. Although it takes a great deal of skill to play ragtime, the feel seems non-orchestral to me."

The Ragsters' concert band style can be heard on their 1997 CD (*RMS 1000CD*) which they titled *Trouble* after "Trouble Rag" by Cecil Duane Crabb and Will Morrison. The effort was self-produced and financed and was recorded at BCR Recordings in Kansas City over a three-week period. The Ragsters present some familiar pieces on their CD, such as James P. Johnson's "Carolina Shout" and William H. Krell's "Mississippi Rag," but they also play some interesting arrangements of less familiar rags, such as Charles L. Johnson's "Tar Babies" and W.H. Kiefer's "Raggy Trombone." Their CD is available from Gary Richmond, 4525 Cambridge, Kansas City, KS 66103.

Although they have been together just a few years, the TurpinTyme Ragsters are a welcome addition to the contemporary ragtime scene. They fill a special niche — that of the small ragtime band — much in the tradition of their cross-state colleagues, the St. Louis Ragtimers. The Ragsters play an important role by keeping this special music alive in a way that transports their listeners back to the turn of the century, a simpler time of ice cream socials and concerts in the park.

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