

# Music

Halfway through the novel the reader of Ragtime witnesses a sudden and considerable shift in emphasis as a new character appears, allowing the author to explore some further important issues: the question of race and the importance of popular culture in the formation of the modern U.S. society. The black ragtime piano player Coalhouse Walker Junior enters the New Rochelle family's parlor.

Before turning to the question of racial injustice, which forms undoubtedly one of the central themes of the novel, I will examine a no less central theme of Ragtime, the role in the American society of popular culture in general and that of ragtime in particular. Naturally, even here it is impossible to draw a neat line and bracket out the question of race completely: its nature is all-pervasive, underlying all aspects of American life.

## Ragtime in Ragtime

Coalhouse arrives in his shining, new Model T Ford, is well-dressed, well-mannered, well-off. The degree of self-confidence while paying calls to the white middle-class family is striking. "He seemed to be able to transform the customary deference practiced by his race so that they reflected to his own dignity rather than the recipient". (R 168) This attitude puzzles Father to such an extent that one day it occurs to him "that Coalhouse Walker Jr. (does not) know he (is) a Negro." (R 168) Father is not only puzzled. He regards Walker's behavior as something potentially dangerous. The second half of the novel, most of which is devoted to Coalhouse Walker's futile struggle for justice in the racist society, shows that Father's assessment of Walker's potential for "creating trouble" was correct. Yet it is not the musician who is to blame.

The purpose of Coalhouse Walker's visits is not purely social. He wants to win back Sarah, a black girl staying with the family, who earlier in the novel abandoned in despair her newly-born child in the family's garden. Both Sarah

and her child were found and allowed to stay. Thus Coalhouse Walker, the father of the child, starts a formal courtship to atone for his failure in the past, get reconciled with his estranged lover and start a family. Gradually he succeeds in winning back Sarah's affection but the marriage does not take place as other events get in the way.

At one moment during Coalhouse's courtship Mother invites the ragtime musician for tea. The family, Sarah and the reader learn that he is a professional pianist now "more or less permanently located in New York, having secured a job with the Jim Europe Clef Club orchestra, a well-known ensemble that (gives) regular concerts at the Manhattan Casino on 155th Street and Eighth Avenue". (R 165) When Father asks him to play something, Coalhouse plays two pieces by the great ragtime composer Scott Joplin, "Wall Street Rag" and "the most famous rag of all". (R 166), "The Maple Leaf Rag."

The choice of the musical genre, composer and songs is of course not incidental, throughout the book we are supposed to move in a ragtime universe. Ragtime forms a formal framework of the whole novel, stretching from Scott Joplin's motto, advising the piano player (and probably by extension the reader) not "to play (or read?) Ragtime fast" to the very last page, where the narrator with a touch of nostalgia concludes that the "era of Ragtime had run out, with the heavy breath of a machine, as if history were no more than a player piano". (R 334) Next to the movies (hence the chapter devoted to the role of film in both novels, with a discussion of Tateh alias the self-constructed filmmaker Ashkenazy) it functions, as Paul Levine suggests, as a "controlling image of art in the novel." (Levine 59)

A number of critics have commented on the stylistic and thematic affinities between the text and the musical style. John G. Parks for instance starts with the description of ragtime music as "characterized by its syncopated rhythm – the treble hand on the piano accenting second and third beats of a measure, improvising as it were, and the bass playing a steady, precise and regularly accented beat. The effect is a consequence of the mixture of formalized and improvised." Then he goes on to draw an analogy between Doctorow's text and the music. For Parks the music "captures well Doctorow's sense of the Progressive Era – repetition colliding with change, convention with innovation." (Parks 58) George Stade expresses a similar point yet he goes even further in his bold attempt to make connections: "The rhythm of the sentences and events in the novel is the verbal equivalent of ragtime. The left hand pounds out the beat of historical change. It modulates from the WASP to the immigrant to the black families as through the tonic, dominant and subdominant chords upon which the right hand builds its syncopating improvisations. These are variations on themes provided by representative figures and events of the time." (Parks 59)

Naturally, it would be possible to continue in a similar fashion for a long time. One could, for instance, take the traditional structure of a ragtime song, consisting of three to five 16 or 32 bar strains, usually repeated at intervals, and point at a striking correspondence between the individual narrative strains in the novel and those of the ragtime composition. Among the obvious candidates for a strain would certainly be the stories of the three families plus perhaps the characters of Houdini and Nesbit, i.e. the two historical figures to whom the author pays most attention. Whether Houdini or Nesbit (or neither) would finally qualify would depend entirely on the mood or momentary inspiration of the interpreter. One could even go further than that, making use of the fact that a strain consisted of two- and four-bar figures that were repeated and varied so that the necessary number of bars per strain was achieved. Thus individual incidents, motifs or themes in the book could be paralleled to the ragtime figures and in so doing allocated a place in the imaginary ragtime composition in the interpreter's mind. However this would be a very exhausting and perhaps not so productive enterprise. Therefore let us turn back to the moment in the novel when Coalhouse Walker Jr. is asked to give a private performance to the New Rochelle family.

In the following extract Doctorow demonstrates his superior skill in communicating a number of issues about the historical period and its cultural situation to his readers<sup>1</sup> by means of a seemingly simple flow of beautiful prose:

*He began to play Ill-tuned or not the Aeolian had never made such sounds. Small clear chords hung in the air like flowers. The melodies were like bouquets. There seemed to be no other possibilities for life than those delineated by the music. When the piece was over Coalhouse Walker turned on the stool and found in his audience the entire family, Mother, Father, the boy, Grandfather and Mother's Younger Brother, who had come down from his room in shirt and suspenders to see who was playing. Of all of them he was the only one who knew ragtime. He had heard it in his nightlife period in New York. He had never expected to hear it in his sister's home.*

This brief paragraph informs the reader about several things. First it is the presence of a piano in the parlor. "The United States underwent something of a piano craze in the last decades of the nineteenth century." Like in the case of many other machines and instruments, the production of pianos was revolutionized in the 1890s, making it "a fixture in every middle-class home. (...) A piano in a parlor and music lessons for the children were marks of refinement and respectability." (Nye 314) In this way the narrator provides the readers with yet another sign locating the family on the social scale and adds an interesting detail about how members of the turn of the century middle class spent their leisure

time. Further we can see that despite the great popularity and impact of the musical genre ragtime has not reached everybody. What appears, from today's perspective, as the dominant sound of the era, was initially restricted to the urban cultural centers and its racially-mixed audience formed a minority among the consumers of popular music, just like Younger Brother (a white man!) was the only one in the family who had heard the musical style before.

Naturally, it is hardly surprising. When Coalhouse Walker strikes the keyboard and starts "producing clusters of syncopating chords and thumping octaves" (again, another apt description), the ragtime era has only begun. Also, one has to bear in mind that at the turn of the century new musical tunes or fads were not reaching their audiences at a speed we are used to today. The phonograph and the radio, with their disseminating – while at the same time leveling – influences, were essentially non-existent yet.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, there were established competitors, occupying the American musical mainstream against which the new style had to assert itself.

The new mass market in music was dominated by a group of gifted composers who shrewdly appealed to the popular tastes of the day turning out literally thousands of songs for home performance. Among them were Theodore Dreisser's talented brother Paul Dresser, Charles K. Harris, Gussie Davis, just to name a few. Most of the songs these men produced were sentimental ballads, on occasion allowing the middle-class lady to shed a tear or two while performing and/or listening to it. Another popular musical form was the so-called parlor song. The most famous creator of parlor songs was Carrie Jacobs Bond. Doctorow uses the personality of this hardworking and prolific woman – whom Nye calls the most popular woman composer in American musical history – to demonstrate the different standing that the two genres occupied with the middle classes: Father, who according to the narrator was not "not knowledgeable in music," had not heard ragtime but "his taste ran to Carrie Jacobs Bond." (R 166) However, to describe the American musical scene of the turn of the century as dominated by the ballad and the parlor song as the sole competitors of ragtime would not be enough. There was also the music of the theatrical productions, in particular musical comedy – a typically American form of theater entertainment – and operetta.

Nevertheless in the course of time the new style did reach the masses both as a genuine form in its own right and, to an even greater extent, as a musical influence on other styles. The all-pervasiveness of ragtime even found its reflection in the "high culture" of a T.S. Elliot. Just let us recall lines 128-130 of *The Waste Land*

O O O O that Shakespearian Rag-  
It's so elegant

*So intelligent*

where Eliot transforms the lyrics of a 1912 ragtime song

*(That Shakespearian Rag,  
Most intelligent, very elegant)* (Berlin 38)

It becomes obvious, as Edward A. Berlin convincingly argues, that by the beginning of the second decade ragtime was virtually omnipresent. An earlier newspaper article captures the mood in the following way:

*Probably the majority of our readers (...) the most popular music of the day is that known as "rag-time"... From New York to California and from the great lakes to the gulf ragtime music of all styles is the rage. Look at the ballroom programmes for the past season and we find rag-time and other "coon" melodies introduced to every dance where it is practicable.* (Berlin 8)

The difficulties the new style was facing are hardly surprising for yet another reason. Its rise was accompanied by a bitter debate about its merit and arguments of its opponents were not dissimilar from those on the part of the guardians of good taste who have been attacking for instance rock music ever since it appeared. Here is a turn of the century diatribe against ragtime:

*"Pass along the streets of any large city of a summer evening when the windows are open and take note of what music you hear being played. It is no longer the great masters, or the lesser classicists – nor even the "Salon-komponisten" (i.e. Carrie Jacobs Bond) that used to be prime favorites with the boarding-school misses. Not a bit of it! It is "rag time.(...) It can not be denied that the lower types of "rag-time" – and the bulk of it – has done much to lower the musical taste and standard of the whole musical public, irrespective of color.* (Berlin 38/39)

The following extract deals with MTV videos and was written 88 years later:

*These are the three great lyrical themes: sex, hate and a swarmy, hypocritical version of brotherly love. Such polluted sources issue in a muddy stream where only monsters can swim. A glance at the videos that project images on the wall of Plato's cave since MTV took it over suffices to prove this. Hitler's image recurs frequently enough in exciting contexts to give one pause. Nothing noble, sublime, profound, delicate, tasteful or even decent can find a place in such tableaux. There is room only for the intense, chang-*

*ing, crude and immediate, which Tocqueville warned us would be the character of democratic art, combined with a pervasiveness, importance and content beyond Tocqueville's wildest imagination. (Bloom 74)*

Although it is apparent that Bloom's exaggerated language cannot be taken quite seriously – in order to make his point and shake his audience he takes a very provocative stand – a thinking reader should not accept the use of such sweeping, dubious generalizations and above all the authoritarian value judgments about culture that are shared by both Bloom and his turn-of-the-century predecessor.

As a reaction to the above attacks one might for instance point out that sometimes popular culture had very beneficial effects, and stimulated the coming into existence of new, challenging cultural forms. The example of ragtime can serve as a case in point: although it withered away after World War I, it had, along with the blues, a considerable influence on the rise of jazz music – and most jazz certainly cannot be accused of a lack of sophistication. But still, even in the case of jazz one has reasonable ground to doubt its potential of passing the Allan Bloom good standards test, where only Bach and Beethoven unquestionably qualify.

Nevertheless, no matter what the academics' arguments over these issues are, they mean very little in the society at large. The production and consumption of such "debasng" cultural forms flourishes in this century despite the attacks coming from the elitist "Tocquevillians", and with little concern even for the scholars who embrace it. So, to come back to the question of ragtime, the assaults on the style did not really matter as the general public came to require the new musical form.

The emergence of ragtime coincides with the rise of Tin Pan Alley, the center of the musical publishing, that was soon to dominate the whole business. Yet the Tin Pan Alley decision makers could not afford to leave the demands of the public unnoticed either. Despite their initial reluctance to include ragtime pieces among their publications, gradually they gave way. Much of this opinion shift can be attributed to the spectacular success of a single ragtime piece, Scott Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag*, the very same composition Coalhouse Walker Jr. plays in the New Rochelle Family's parlor.

As it is usually the case, the public acceptance of ragtime's name and style into the mainstream of American popular culture went hand in hand with the loss of its ethnic identity. Ragtime as a musical style might have used a variety of different sources – the march and the dance forms like the quadrille, lancers, and schottische and various musicologists and cultural critics might disagree as to what role each of the elements plays in the constitution of the style, none of them however would question its racial origins, which were black.

Generally the theoreticians looked for ragtime's roots in the rural area and its music – the plantation spiritual and work songs, “boisterous merry making,” banjo strumming, “patting juba”, and the popular imitation and caricature of Negro music, mistrelsy” (Berlin 24), while the city came to be regarded as the site of the blending of all these elements into something new. As James Weldon Johnson put it in his Autobiography, “Ragtime was most generally assumed to have been born in “the South”, in some heavily populated area, but by the 1890s the ragtime idea must have been known in many areas of the United States.” ( in Berlin 25)

Whether one looked further back into the rural past of the new musical style or whether one concentrated on the more recent Southern urban setting as a site of fermentation out of which the new musical style sprang, the African-American origins were beyond dispute. Yet, in a society where marketing the popular becomes big business – moreover one largely controlled by whites – its racial “purity” is soon a thing of the past.

Following the achievement of Joplin and other pioneers of ragtime, predominantly white epigones soon started to produce songs even more accessible to the general public. The formula has always been the same: simplify and embellish. Irving Berlin's phenomenal success with his song *Alexander's Ragtime Band* is a fitting case in point. Such an appropriation of an innovative style can be regarded as regrettable – as indeed Joplin strongly detested such simplifications – since the original style loses some of its characteristic features, on the other hand the mainstream is, beyond any doubt, enriched. What came into existence came to be hailed as something uniquely and distinctively American:

*As you walk up and down the streets of an American city you feel in its jerk and rattle a personality different from that of any European capital. This is American. It is our lives, and it helps to form our characters and conditions our mode of action. It should have expression in art, simply because any people must express itself if it is to know itself. No European music could express this American personality. Ragtime I believe does express it. It is to-day the one true American music. (Berlin 51)*

Nevertheless, in spite of the all too obvious contribution of the African-Americans, there did exist voices who would deny them their share in shaping the American music, claiming that the so-called “negro melodies ...cannot be considered as American, for the negro is a product of Africa, and not of America”. (Berlin 50) such evidently erroneous and biased view was not generally shared, as can be seen from Theodore Roosevelt's attitude to the same question:

*There are but two chances for the development of schools of American music and of American singing, and these will come, one from the colored people and one from the vanishing Indian folk.* (Berlin 50)

Today, at the end of the same century which began with the ragtime era it is obvious that the progressive president's assessment of the situation was correct. We have seen the same pattern repeated over and over: ragtime, blues, jazz, swing, rap, all styles developed by African-Americans, later taken up by the white musicians, imitated, transformed, yet giving new impulses to the American music as a whole, changing it forever.

By highlighting ragtime as the first in a long series of influences on American popular music and culture Doctorow acknowledges how much American society owes to the African-American element for attaining a sense of its own identity. It was above all the ethnic musicians along with the immigrant artists who made American popular culture happen. And it is exactly the embracing of the popular which seems so quintessentially American. Doctorow makes a convincing point: the whole text can be seen as a tribute to the countless men and women who, though marginalized, kept creating. They may have suffered from lack of acknowledgment, from the ruthless appropriation of their styles and ideas, nevertheless they did have an impact on the popular culture, changing it fundamentally if not for the better, at least for something more open and democratic.

## **The Master of Ragtime: Scott Joplin**

A special tribute, though between the lines, is paid to Scott Joplin, the most famous and probably the best ragtime composer. Not only does Doctorow use a quote from Joplin for the motto of the novel, but also he borrows a motif from his ragtime opera *Treemonisha*.

Joplin never thought of himself as a mere writer of popular songs. Rather, he regarded his own ragtime composition as a very serious project and himself as an artist, not wholly appreciated by the public. Two things, in my view, aptly illustrate Joplin's earnestness. First it is the musician's artistic development. "As the years passed, the texture of his rags grew thicker, and the syncopation began to grow sparser. This was an artistic, not a commercial choice. The way to make money on rags was to keep them easy enough so that the amateur pianist could get through them without difficulty". (Collier 50) Joplin was reasonably well-off thanks to the royalties he kept receiving for his *Maple Leaf Rag* and to a lesser degree for other pieces he wrote. Thus he was not in serious need to court the public taste which demanded easier material for playing. If we compare Joplin's relatively modest output of altogether 39 ragtimes to that of some



of his contemporaries, his artistic aspirations perhaps become even more apparent: Paul Dresser's long series of hits year by year ("ten in 1896, six in 1897, sixteen in 1898, and at least five best-selling songs each year until his death in 1906", Nye p. 316) and characteristic hunch for the turn-of-the-century popular taste appear far removed from Joplin's concentrated, precise and increasingly demanding compositions.

The second sign is Joplin's attitude to how ragtime pieces should actually be performed. The author of *Maple Leaf Rag*, who unlike many other black musicians, had received classical musical education, insisted that ragtime should be played exactly as written. He detested the pianists who would "improve" the score with improvisations or would play it too fast to dazzle the listeners. All this Joplin saw as only spoiling the effect. Everything should be written down in the score and rendered as such. Thus, Joplin's notion of a ragtime composition and its performance came very close to how normally classical music was perceived.

Later in his life Joplin developed an even greater artistic ambition than mere composition of single ragtime pieces. In 1903, while still living in Saint Louis, Joplin wrote an opera *A Guest of Honor*, which was performed several times in Missouri, but did not make it beyond the borders of the state. Between 1905 and 1907 he devoted most of his energies to his second operatic project – *Treemonisha*. Yet, unlike in the case of his shorter numbers, the publishers were not interested. Even his life-long publisher, friend, and confidant Stark was too sceptical about the commercial prospects of the new work. Increasingly frustrated by his inability to have the opera published and performed, Joplin moved to New York in the hope of finding backing for the project. But the New York publishing establishment remained indifferent. So, in 1911 Joplin himself arranged to have his work published and, until 1915 he labored to have it performed. He managed to organize several auditions in Harlem, himself accompanying the singers on the piano, but that was all he could achieve. He died in 1917, disappointed and broken, in a mental institution.

The explanation why Joplin's opera was not considered worthy of putting on stage will inevitably be a subjective one, largely dependent both on the tastes as well as on the ideological position of the respective critic. James Lincoln Collier acknowledges that one reason for the opera's lack of success was "the musical snobbery of the white musical establishment, which was not willing to admit a black man as an equal" (Collier 51/52), but then he goes on to point out that black musical theater did exist in New York of the time. For him *Treemonisha* is essentially a "flawed work". A somewhat different evaluation comes from Jasen and Tichenor. They praise Joplin for his "bittersweet music, an esoteric fantasy and nostalgia that evokes imagery of the old South," and they also mention other Black musical productions performed around the time. Here, they make an important point that Collier leaves out: "Where the black Broadway musicals of

Williams and Walker (i.e. African-Americans whose works – unlike Joplin's – were performed) were spoofing plantation life, Joplin, in *Treemonisha*, was trying to convey a serious message set on the same plantation." (Jasen, Tichenor 85) Perhaps, on the basis of these accounts, a relatively sound conclusion can be drawn: it was the combination of the race of the composer with the seriousness of the message he was trying to convey that made the work, which he regarded as his masterpiece, unacceptable for the white-dominated cultural market that still demanded and promoted racial stereotypes and –above all – simplicity. Hence the Harlem auditions in front of a sympathetic African-American audience were as far as Joplin could get; the white Broadway audiences were not ready yet.

Perhaps one should point out that Joplin's efforts toward the end of his life are marked by a certain paradox. In order to deal – in a serious manner – with African-American themes he gradually abandoned the truly African-American realm of ragtime composition for opera, a European, and thus for the most part alien cultural import. The uneasiness of a marriage of such disparate elements might have constituted yet another possible reason for the reluctance on the part of the white cultural establishment to publish and produce his work. For them, probably, the superior form of opera was not to be used as a vehicle for dealing with "alien" and "low" African-American themes. Today, on the contrary, one could expect a similar objection from the other side: a weighty, authentic African-American message should not make use of the "alien" and "largely discredited, culturally imperialistic" form of opera.

In his well-known essay *False Documents*, Doctorow makes the following radical statement: "History has to be written and rewritten from one generation to another. The act of composition can never end." (Trenner 24) Similarly, every generation reevaluates its cultural heritage. In 1975, in the same year as *Ragtime* was published, *Treemonisha* did reach Broadway. Gerald Bordman describes the production and the opera's story in the following manner:

*A fine cast of black singing actors brought Joplin's story irresistibly to life. A childless couple, Ned and Monisha find a baby under a tree and so name it Treemonisha. They persuade white people to educate her. The opera begins when Treemonisha is 18. A woodoo conjurer, Zozetrick, abducts her to stop her from enlightening her neighbors. A friend, Remus, disguised as a scarecrow, leads her rescuers. Once free, she forgives her kidnapper, and her neighbors elect her to lead them. (Bordman 686)*

It is exactly the motif of the black foundling brought up in a white family that appears in Doctorow's novel. Although he himself has never explicitly said so, it is possible that the author of *Ragtime* consciously used the motif to pay tribute to the great ragtime master, thus acknowledging the merit of a work that

during the composer's lifetime was unappreciated. However, the use of the motif appears to be the only feature the two texts share. Whereas Joplin creates a female Joan of Arc figure and evokes the myths of the black Southern and African past, Doctorow uses the male character of Coalhouse Walker III (i.e. the black foundling) to construct a metaphor of the modern American society, highlighting – though somewhat ironically – another persistent myth: that of a melting pot. The three families, belonging to vastly different social strata, in the course of the novel become one as the immigrant Tateh gets married to Mother and together they bring up their children, including Coalhouse's black boy. At the very last page of the novel Tateh, who established himself firmly in the movie industry, contemplating the children at play outside their new home in California, has an idea for a film: "A bunch of children who were pals, white black, fat thin, rich poor, all kinds,....., a society of ragamuffins, like all of us, a gang, getting into trouble and getting out again." (R 334) A Hollywood kind of melting-pot in action.

## The Ragtime Revival

If one looks at the publication dates of *Ragtime* and many cultural and musical histories dealing with the style (see the bibliography of this chapter) as well as at the date of *Treemonisha's* arrival on Broadway, one cannot help noticing a striking coincidence: all of them were coming out within a relatively short span of five years between 1975 and 1980. Indeed, *Ragtime* was written, read and rewarded<sup>3</sup> amidst a major ragtime revival that swept the United States and subsequently also other parts of the world, including the former Czechoslovakia. How come that the people of the 1970s suddenly found liking in the long forgotten musical style from the turn of the century? How can one explain that Scott Joplin became once again, after more than half a century of oblivion, a prominent American composer of considerable fame? The answer to these questions provides a very interesting insight into how popular culture operates. This ragtime mania goes back to 1971 when the musicologist and pianist Joshua Rifkin recorded an album of Joplin's major pieces. (Significantly, in the light of what has been said about Joplin's artistic aspirations, it was published by Nonesuch, a small label normally specializing in classical music). The recording was a surprising success and the director George Roy Hill used one of the numbers, *The Entertainer*, for background music of his feature *The Sting*, a highly successful movie released in 1973. Those who had not heard ragtime in the record store, could not escape it in the movie theater. And the sound caught on.

One might speculate that if it had not been for Rifkin's recording, and above all for the soundtrack of the enormously popular *The Sting* (despite some mixed reviews in the high-brow press it won the Academy Award for the best picture

of the year), the whole revival might not have happened and Doctorow would have been deprived of his central theme and catchy title. Then, probably, we would read and study a different novel, towards the end of the decade, musical and cultural critics like Edward A. Berlin, David A. Jasen and Trebor Jay Michener would have devoted their scholarly energies to completely different projects, and Joplin's *Treemonisha* might not have made it as far as Broadway after all.

Naturally, it is impossible to answer similar questions. However, the story of *Ragtime* and the new ragtime boom confirm another central idea of Doctorow's novel: popular culture is real. It is a major moving force in the present day society and it has an enormous impact on what we listen to, watch, how we understand ourselves and how we relate to the world around us. Further, we can see it as a confirmation of Doctorow's notion that history, in this case the history (or sound) of a musical style, is recreated over and over by the subsequent generations. The ragtime of the 1970s is not the same as it used to be in Joplin's times. The idea of its sound differs vastly from when it was played for the first time. As Berlin points out, what has changed is the relative positioning of the piano. Ragtime then was characterized by an "abundance and variety of instrumental and vocal versions" and "the piano genre did not have the prominence it enjoys today" (Berlin 10) yet it is exactly the sound of the piano that one associates with the style now: it is hardly coincidental that Coalhouse Walker Junior, a dominant character of the novel, is a piano player.

This partial divergence from the idea of the original sound is not the only element in the recent rise of ragtime that has been newly created. Those who remember *The Sting* will know that the film takes place in Chicago of the 1920s. Since movies function, at least for the mass audience, as the main source of historical information – a well-known fact ever since D.W. Griffith took his camera and shot *Birth of a Nation* in 1915 – ragtime then became the sound of the jazz age. Infuriated cultural historians might pull out their hair in fits of rage, but all in vain. Despite their anger, frustration or contempt (this depends on the personality of the historian), the teenage cinema-goers forever remembered the sympathetic, blue-eyed con characters of Robert Redford and Paul Newman in the best years of organized crime, accompanied by Joplin's charming music: upon leaving the theater practically everybody was humming happily the singalong melody of *The Entertainer*. Or maybe "forever" was too naive a concept to use. Indeed, cinematic corrections were bound to appear. In 1981, Miloš Forman's not so successful<sup>4</sup> film version of *Ragtime* was released. Then, perhaps, the fine soundtrack of the movie reestablished the connection between the musical style and the time when it was actually played.

The final point I want to make concerning the 1970s' ragtime revival and the appearance of *Ragtime* is the enormous commercial success of the novel. In 1975 *Ragtime* became the best-selling novel of the year, more successful

than Peter Benchley's thriller Jaws. The book sold more than a quarter million copies in hardback in the first year of its publication. One year later almost three million copies of the paperback edition appeared on the market. "Rarely, if ever, had a serious novel entered the dizzying world of mass culture with such a splash." (Levine 60) The success of a novel – that explores a whole range of historically and culturally relevant issues – with the mass audience calls into question an imaginary boundary between "high" and "low" literature, thus illustrating "some of Doctorow's ideas about the fluidity of American culture". (Levine 60). The degree of the novels' acceptance by the mass readership and its capacity to make huge sums of money were perhaps the reasons why, after the initial critical success, some other critics started to view the novel with a more suspicious eye. Roger Sale, for instance, writing for the *New York Review of Books*, "called the novel "all surface," and Jeffrey Hart, in the *National Review*, accused the novel of sentimentality and questioned its moral vision." (Parks 57) One certainly cannot commit the crime of defying the neat categories that had been imposed on literature and that are still being defended by a part of the literally critical establishment and get away with it without a punishment in the form of dismissal of one's creative effort. Success is, by definition, suspicious.

I do not want to claim that the novel's vast readership would have been the same, had the novel dealt with a different historical era that was identified with a different and perhaps not so popular tune. What if Doctorow had written his following book, Loon Lake, instead? There would be no popular sound, no appealing title to boost the sales. Indeed, it is quite certain that the novel did cash in on the seventies' ragtime revival. The choice on the part of the author to use the then popular musical style as the unifying element of his kaleidoscopic text is a happy one. (Even in Doctorow's other novels one can detect a similar strategy in an effort to find resonance with a contemporary popular theme or mode of discourse.) Yet this "commercial" trait in Doctorow does not invalidate the broad array of serious messages he communicates – one of them paradoxically being that what really matters in a society does not necessarily have to stem from its "high" culture. The success of Ragtime thus serves as a case in point that looking for or maintaining an opposition between "the popular" and "the serious" in literature is an essentially artificial and flawed project. The example of the serious writer E.L. Doctorow shows that under certain circumstances it is possible to have it both ways. If it is so, and a piece of writing has the capacity of being relevant and intellectually challenging while at the same time being readable and generally accessible, then, perhaps, the whole opposition is made impossible. But even if one believes in the existence of such a line, one should not dismiss the writer for his success. For if a "serious" writer wants to communicate something to one's readers, it is better to have a larger audience. A top place on

the best-seller list does not only mean more money for the author, it also means more potential recipients of what he or she has got to say.

## **Dos Passos' Popular: A Modernist's Elitism**

Having seen the major role popular culture plays in Doctorow's fictional universe, one might ask to what extent this element is represented in Dos Passos' overarching document of American life, his trilogy U.S.A., in particular in its first part, The 42nd Parallel, which – due to the fact that it covers the same historical era – I have decided to concentrate upon. Where in Doctorow's fiction the figures of the black ragtime pianist Coalhouse Walker Jr., the immigrant filmmaker Tateh, the Jewish escapologist Houdini and the sex-symbol of the day Nesbit allow the author to illustrate the dominance of popular culture in the American society, highlighting its role of a major constitutive element of what the U.S. has become, Dos Passos lacks such a dimension. For Doctorow popular culture is a creator of values and attitudes (Tateh), a possible key to creating and maintaining the power relations within it (Nesbit) and, to make matters quite clear, he also introduces a character who offers a way of reading and critiquing them (Goldman). At the same time he pays a long overdue tribute to its heterogeneous and very often unappreciated creators (Houdini, Joplin). Dos Passos on the other hand offers no such reminder. Among the fictional characters of The 42nd Parallel we find only one "artist", the "refined" personality of Eleanor Stoddard, but her artistic output hardly creates any resemblance to a mass culture.

The selection of real-life figures in Dos Passos' biography sections is equally telling: among the nine interpretive portraits of notable personalities of the time, which complement and add another dimension to the stories of the fictional characters, he includes only politicians (Debbs, Haywood, Bryan, La Follette), businessmen (Carnegie, Keith) or inventors (Burbank, Edison, Steinmetz). It is only much later in the trilogy, in The Big Money, that biographies of two artists – Isadora Duncan and Rudolph Valentino – appear, accompanying the appearance of the fictional character of Margo Dowling, who is an actress. Despite these relatively late presentations, Dos Passos' looking away from the importance of popular culture is quite apparent. For him, the major shaping forces of the material condition of the American society lie in the inventors' laboratories, the spiritually hollow, corrupt and acquisitive nature of American capitalism is largely determined by its businessmen, financiers and industrialists, and the (im)possibility of resisting these negative trends – sometimes in a defiantly heroic manner – is located in the realm of the political life. All this is quite plausible but, as Doctorow's "variation on history," i.e., Ragtime, suggests, it is not the whole story. For Doctorow, history is not confined to the highly visible, yet also limited

stage, dominated by white male protagonists, there is a virtually endless number of stages where the same battles are fought. From among them, the realm of popular culture is one of the more important ones.

Such comparison prompts an immediate question. Can we, for the significant lack of attention toward the importance of popular culture, regard Dos Passos as a worse, less insightful writer? Given the material offered to us by the novels a convincing case against Dos Passos could be made. One could really trash him for so much blindness, yet with the state of awareness of the late 1990s at one's back this would hardly be a fair enterprise. Rather, I would once again start with the premise I have already tried to defend several times, i.e. that the degree of insight on the part of the two writers is approximately the same and that Dos Passos' blindness concerning popular culture perfectly complements Doctorow's insights: both together communicate to us something about the changing sight of the society in the course of this century.

If the premise has been found plausible enough, then the lack of attention to popular culture in Dos Passos' novel must be attributed to a general lack of awareness about its constitutive role in the society. Naturally, popular culture is not ignored by the modernist artist. Eliot quotes lyrics of a ragtime song (see above) in *The Waste Land*, so does Dos Passos in the Newsreel sections of the U.S.A. However, for both authors the popular is always seen as a manifestation of the utterly banal, superficial, spiritually empty. In their texts the popular functions as a vehicle for severe ironies pointed at the arid minds of their fellow-citizens, or at the clash between the sentimental myths it sets forth and the harsh reality of what really goes on in the society. The popular diverts its consumers from the important questions of life by offering either a base world of sex, crime and scandal as suggested by Eliot's attack on the popular press

*What have you done with yours,  
buried her in the garden? (WL)*

or it brings the people into a world of makebelieve with essentially the same effect:

*I met my love in the Alamo  
When the moon was on the rise  
Her beauty quite bedimmed its light  
So radiant were her eyes (FP 75)*

The interplay of skillfully arranged fragments in Dos Passos' Newsreels communicates to the reader the chaotic nature of information distribution where the trivial mixes with the weighty and platitudes occupy the same space as epochal historical events:

## Newsreel V

### BUGS DRIVE OUT BIOLOGIST

elopers bind and gag; is released by dog

### EMPEROR NICHOLAS II FACING REVOLT OF

#### EMPIRE GRANTS SUBJECTS LIBERTY

paralysis stops surgeon's knife by the stroke of a pen

the last absolute monarchy of Europe passes into

history miner of Death Valley and freak advertiser of

Santa Fe Road may die sent to bridewell for stealing

plaster angel

On the banks of the Wabash far away

(FP 77)

The use of the honeyed lyrics of popular songs is particularly effective when they are juxtaposed with descriptions of the plight of the workers as in the second part of Newsreel VI:

*We were sailing along*

*On moonlight bay*

*You can hear the voices ringing*

*They seem to say*

*You have stolen my heart, now don't go away*

*Just as we sang*

*love's*

*old*

*sweet*

*songs*

*On moonlight bay*

### MOB LYNCHES AFTER PRAYER

when the metal poured out of the furnace I saw the men running to a place of safety. To the right of the furnace I saw a party of ten men all of them running wildly and their clothes a mass of flames. Apparently some of them had been injured when the explosion occurred and several of them tripped and fell. The hot metal ran over the poor men in a moment.

### PRAISE MONOPOLY AS BOON TO ALL

*industrial foes work for peace at Mrs. Potter Palmer's*

*love's*

*old*



*sweet*

*song*

*We were sailing along*

*on moonlight bay*

(FP 100)

The world where workers suffer cruel deaths due to desperate working conditions is not only set next to the world of the “Sweet Song from the Moonlight Bay”, but also next to the proud headline praising monopoly. The author here makes a clear connection between the monopoly capitalism that not only exploits but also kills workers, while at the same time feeding them with escapist images of clichéd happiness. The occurrence of mob lynching after prayer then completes the picture of the all-pervading violence in a society gone wrong, a kind of perverted raisin on the icing of an essentially rotten cake.

## Conclusion

I have demonstrated how popular songs almost invariably function in Dos Passos’ novel, particularly in the Newsreel sections. They are presented as a kind of surrogate idyllic space beyond the day-to-day dreary and dangerous reality, as a “mindless expression of the platitudinous heart of American feeling and belief”. (Pizer 80) Unlike in Doctorow’s fiction, the popular in Dos Passos has no other dimension. Truly enough, Doctorow is well aware of the points Dos Passos makes – his Nesbit, too, functions as a great “pacifier” of the masses and his Tateh forms the public opinion by mastering his craft as a filmmaker – yet about the role of popular culture in general and popular music in particular he has more to say.

Doctorow sees the popular as a genuine manifestation of the heterogeneous American identity, a channel through which the creative energies of the ethnic minorities manifest themselves. Where Dos Passos mocks popular music for its banality, Doctorow celebrates it for its novelty and diversity. Where Dos Passos points at its capacity for subjugating the masses, Doctorow implicitly stresses its liberating potential. Where Dos Passos’ negative perception of the popular music is largely one-dimensional, Doctorow draws a more complex picture: his choice of the musical style of ragtime, his portrayal of Coalhouse Walker and tribute to Joplin suggest an awareness of the fact that popular music is not only an opiate to contain the discontented masses. Rather, Doctorow sees it as a complex site of a power-struggle where tastes – informed by underlying social and racial biases – clash, out of which new understanding or “visions” of reality may arise.

## Notes

1. The novel, in many ways, problematizes the concept of an objectively verifiable historical fact (see also the introduction and the following chapter on race) and stresses the narrative character of history. To make that point, Doctorow introduces a number of obvious inaccuracies predominantly related to the famous figures of the day that he incorporated in the novel. Other things, – descriptions of the lifestyles and values of the day, the material background, i.e. New York City, the middle-class home, remain well-researched and in accordance with other historical accounts of the period.

2. To be more exact, the phonograph was already a commercial reality in 1900 (Nye 322) but its spectacular rise had to wait till later in the decade, while the even more dramatic spread of radio was due only two decades later.

3. Ragtime was awarded the National Book Critics Circle prize for fiction.

4. Forman's film version has not been generally regarded as a success. I think it would be appropriate to give a brief summary some of the charges against the movie. One of the obvious problems Forman was facing was the concentration of such a multifaceted narrative with a number of different strands to a standard film length of maximum 120 minutes. Forman decided to concentrate on the conflict of Coalhouse Walker, an inevitable choice if one wants to create a cinematic spectacle full of suspense. Yet the novel is much richer. Some other no less important motifs and incidents have disappeared or have been inadequately reduced to a mere episode (Tateh's story), Ragtime's panorama of real life figures has also been neglected. From among the multiplicity of themes the novel explores only the question of race has been treated sufficiently, the interplay of stories of the three different families (white, black and immigrant) has disappeared. Parts of the book as important as for instance the depiction of Tateh's involvement in the Lawrence Strike, the plight of the immigrant population, Peary's expedition to the North Pole, Father's withering away, the characters of J.P. Morgan, Evelyn Nesbit or Emma Goldman were virtually ignored.

But of course the question is whether it is possible at all to reduce a novel of this kind to a two-hour movie. Robert Altman, who had been originally hired to shoot Ragtime, counted with a film of at least six hours and a 10-hour television mini-series – probably a more realistic estimate if one wanted to give the novel its due. Later however, Altman fell in disrepute with Dino de Laurentiis, the film's producer, was dismissed and the chance to try the impossible was given to Miloš Forman. It would certainly be a highly interesting comparison to see what Altman's solutions would have been. Although I do agree with most of the charges, it seems that the hostility on the part of some American critics toward Forman's film was also fuelled by the fact that Forman had the bad luck of stepping into the great filmmaker's shoes.