

A Ragtime Episode

Clarke Buehling and The Skirtlifters

This is such a gorgeous CD that I can't help but give it a star billing! Clarke (who has appeared at the Reading Banjo Festival several times) plays 5-string banjo, piccolo and 'cello banjos and percussion. Tom Verdott on violin and 2nd banjo, Thom Howard guitar and vocal, Kent Beyette is End Man (*who he?*), Carol Widder on Cello, and John Behling on guitar.

Here are the numbers on the CD with the notes:

Fire Bell Galop RJ Hamilton, 1889

Published in Chicago, this piece was composed and arranged for two banjos and piano. The gallop, or gallopade, was a simple but exuberant dance in which couples sashayed the length of the ballroom and back, trying to avoid collisions.

Creole Belles J Bodewalt Lampe 1900

The familiar second theme of this ragtime march was later sung by Mississippi John Hurt under the title *Richland Woman*. The banjo plays the arrangement by British publisher Clifford Essex. The guitar and violin parts are derived from Lampe's piano solo and the mandolin club parts.

Bowery Buck Tom Turpin 1899

Turpin (1873-1922) was the proprietor of the Rose Bud Saloon in St Louis where Scott Joplin frequently performed from 1901-1907. Turpin had been inspired by a trip to New York City, although he returned to St Louis after only a short stay.

Tickle Toes - a Toe Tickler Percy M Jaques 1908

From Providence, Rhode Island, Jaques, at 28, moved to Jacksonville, Florida, where he published a few pieces for banjo between 1907 and 1909. The title is typical of the playful nature of the ragtime era, and also indicates the era's preference for danceable music.

The Old Man's Dream (The Darkie's Dream) George L Lansing, 1887

Subtitled a "Characteristic Barn Dance" this banjo piece became a big hit and was published for various instrumental combinations. Lansing was a prolific composer and arranger for the 5-string banjo in the Boston area.

The Entertainer Scott Joplin, 1902

Joplin dedicated this piano composition to "James Brown and his Mandolin Club". Clarke based his arrangement on Frank C Bradbury's suggestions and the 1903 John Stark arrangement for the mandolin club.

Darktown Dandies - Walk Round Joe Morley

Morley (1867-1937) composed and published hundreds of complex and beautiful banjo melodies.

Unfortunately very few of Morley's compositions were published with dates. Clarke has transcribed the original piano accompaniment of this British piece to the guitar.

Palladium Rag Joe Morley, 1912

Named for the London concert hall where Morley led a team of banjoists with the Palladium Minstrels. This piece is a favourite of the Skirtlifters for its lively gait and rhythmic variety.

In a Dixie Dell - Slow Drag Percy M Jaques, 1909

This obscure piece was published as a banjo duet in Providence, Rhode Island. When you've danced your way through cakewalks, gallops and rags, a slow drag is the ticket to keeping your partner on the floor and getting a little closer.

Blaze Away! - March & Two Step Abe Holzmann, 1901

The cover art on the original sheet music glorifies the charge up San Juan Hill. For this piece Clarke combined the 1902 arrangement by Louis Tocaben, an American, and the arrangement of Clifford Essex, an Englishman. This was a popular tune published more or less simultaneously for brass band, piano and fretted instruments, though not necessarily in the same key.

A Ragtime Episode Paul Eno, ca. 1900

Eno (1869-1924) published in the Philadelphia area. This uses the original publications and the Fred Van Eps arrangement, which seems to have been derived from the Englishman Joe Earle's arrangement.

Carolina Tar Heel - Cakewalk Dan J Sullivan ca. 1899

This appeared in *Allegro* magazine arranged for three mandolins, guitar and piano, and as a banjo duet. Soon afterward it came out in England in *Turner's Banjo Budget*.

Rag-Time Dance - a Stop-Time Two Step Scott Joplin, 1902

This is derived from the 1906 abridged version for piano, and uses Frank C Bradbury's banjo solo arrangement (1970's). The tapping on the guitar is based on the original instruction to the pianist to stomp his foot during the wonderfully sparse stop-time section of the music.

Georgia Grind Ford T Dabney 1915

Dabney (1883-1958) worked with James Reese Europe's orchestra and with the famed ballroom dancers Vernon and Irene Castle. Clarke arranged the piano solo for 5-string banjo orchestra for the American Banjo Fraternity and more recently for string band.

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Levee Pastime (Darkies Pastime) Gad Robinson 1891

Robinson was a prominent banjo figure in Boston. The tunes included in this medley were drawn from the Afro-American folk repertoire, and make an excellent accompaniment for a buck-dance.

Maple Leaf Rag Scott Joplin 1899

Ragtime's most successful piece and consistent seller, the Maple Leaf Rag gave Joplin an income throughout his life. In fact, it has never fallen out of print since its original publication. This version is based on the banjo arrangement by Fred Van Eps.

Sweet Corn AJ Weidt

Weidt's composition is performed here as published in *The Cadenza* magazine in 1908 when he was very active teaching and directing several fretted instrument clubs around Newark, New Jersey.

Hot Corn - a Plantation Jubilee Paul Eno 1900

Eno composed for and directed numerous banjo and mandolin ensembles, anticipating the ragtime trend and writing many good pieces in that style. This arrangement was cobbled together from the American and English banjo solos, piano accompaniment and old handwritten parts for banjeurine and piccolo banjo.

The tunes are delightful, beautifully arranged and played. Nothing is dull, and there is plenty of life and tunefulness about the playing. Unfortunately

there's no indication of how much the CD costs, or where you can get it easily. There's an email address - www.theskirtlifters.com - from which you can go to "CD Baby". There you'll find some samples of the tracks on the CD and information on how to buy it, though only from the USA.

I must admit that I've never understood whether the name of Clarke's band has the meaning I hope it might have . . .

Listening and fingering

I'm listening to Miles Davies' *Sketches of Spain* - the trumpet is beautifully pitched. Not as good as on the recording which from which Keith Nichols once suggested I should transcribe some of Bix Beiderbecke's solos. That was difficult at times, and got my ear sharper. The standard thing for jazz musicians is to listen to what other people do, take it down note-for-note, and try to reproduce it. Thinking about this, I wondered why I, as "a

dedicated banjo player" (which may, I am aware, be different from "a musician"!) didn't want to write down all Reser's solos, especially the ones which I didn't have or had never been published. I remember the first time I heard Reser playing. It was on one of his later LP records. I was not so much worried about the notes he was playing - I was more interested in trying to work out what he was doing with his right hand. That seemed to be the governing factor. Perhaps all that means is that his left hand was so strong that he didn't worry about it so the listener didn't, either. But my overriding impression was that his right hand just kept going up and down like a metronome.

Now that I'm starting to learn the finger-style banjo (sorry - banjo) I'm beginning to apply the lessons I learned with the plectrum played instrument. They were simple - do all the work with the left hand so that you can let the right hand just go up and down like a metronome - in this case alternating thumb and first finger. It's truly amazing how many possibilities there are on the banjo fingerboard because of the close harmony tuning, and how many times in the printed music the 5th string is used just because it's there, and the open strings or nut position are used for similar reasons. But often it's easier to finger the G of the 5th string somewhere else on the neck. And it's

often inappropriate to have the singing of an open string coming into a sequence of notes which are otherwise staccato. Indeed in violin (and I suspect other classical instruments) open strings are saved only for special effects such as drones (which is also what I've heard with a Chinese banjo-shaped instrument, tuned like a tenor-banjo, which sometimes uses the bass strings as drones against a melody on the first two strings).

Try another mental image of how to make music. Move the left hand up and down the neck as little as possible, getting the range of notes by moving across the strings as *much* as possible. And use thumb and first finger alternately for strong and weak beats (sometimes known as the Morley style, but equally espoused by Tarrant Bailey Jnr and by Chris Sands), and make the fingering produce a pattern where the thumb always acts on the same or a lower string as the finger is just about to hit (very much like plectrum playing). That way I find I can play with speed, strength and accuracy; much more than if I follow some of the printed arrangements and fingerings.