

Clarke Buehling & The  
Skirtlifters Celebrate New CD

# "A Ragtime Episode"

by Emily Kaitz



The Skirtlifters are, from left: Clarke Buehling, banjos and vocals; Kent Beyette, dance and percussion; Thom Howard, guitar, vocals, mandolin and percussion; Tom Verdot, fiddle.

The name Clarke Buehling may not be a household word in Fayetteville, but you've probably seen him around: he's the dapper-looking fellow with a waxed handlebar mustache wearing wire-rimmed glasses, a black wool vest with matching trousers, and looking for all the world like he stepped right out of the 1890's. If you're lucky, you may have heard him playing one of his banjos at the Farmer's Market on the Fayetteville Square. Perhaps you've even heard a performance of his unusual band, the Skirtlifters.

The Skirtlifters authentically recreate the music of the 19th century riverboat, stage and parlor, enlivened by period humor, skits, song and percussive dance. Besides banjoist Clarke Buehling, the group currently consists of Kent Beyette, percussion (from Centerton, AR, near Bentonville), Thom Howard, guitar, vocals & mandolin (from Columbia, MO) and Tom Verdot, fiddle (also from Columbia, MO). In earlier incarnations, the band has included Fayettevillians Kelly Mulhollan, Carol Widder, Allan Gibson, and others. The band's name came from their original fiddler, Hawk Hubbard, who noticed the phenomenon of women lifting their skirts at a contradance as he played his music from the stage.

And now the Skirtlifters have a new CD, "A Ragtime Episode," which celebrates popular and obscure ragtime pieces of the late 19th and early 20th century. The album was several years in the making ("Too long," says Buehling), recorded here in Fayetteville at Crisp Studio and its predecessor, Melody Studio, and includes eighteen instrumental string-band pieces. Some, like Scott Joplin's "The Entertainer" and "Maple Leaf Rag;" or J. Bodevalt Lampe's "Creole Belles" (the second

theme of which was later sung by Mississippi John Hurt under the title "Richland Woman") are recognizable to most listeners, although it's refreshing to hear the Joplin tunes, ordinarily performed on piano, played here by a banjo-led string-band.

Among the CD's more obscure offerings are some songs which were actually written as banjo pieces, such as Joe Morley's bouncy "Palladium Rag," Dan J. Sullivan's strutting cakewalk "Carolina Tar Heel," and the title number, Paul Eno's melancholy "A Ragtime Episode."

The first song on the album, R. J. Hamilton's "Fire Bell Galop," sets the tone for the recording. Originally composed and arranged for 2 banjos and a piano, the galop was a rollicking dance in which couples sashayed the length of the ballroom and back, trying to avoid collisions. This tune and many others on the album will make you want to dance. By no means is this a recording of staid historical pieces that have no appeal to anyone but the student of ragtime or esoteric banjo styles - this is lively, fun, foot-stomping fare which, in its archaic string-band rendition, is much welcome in a high-tech world of electronic, synthesized, and digitally-enhanced music.

Clarke Buehling moved to Fayetteville in 1982, and began performing with an early version of the Skirtlifters in 1985. The band has 3 previous recordings, the 1996 CD "Wait For The Wagon," and 2 cassettes, "Fire Alarm" and "Somewhere In Dixie." Afficionados of banjo player jokes (example: q. What does it mean when the banjo player is drooling from both sides of his mouth? a. The stage is level!) will find rich fodder in Buehling, who, when asked how many banjos he

owned, replied begrudgingly and evasively, "More than 15." These include a rare piccolo banjo from the late 1890's, a cello-banjo featuring a 16" rim, and more traditional 5-string banjos, all of which are fretted and appear variously on "A Ragtime Episode."

But Buehling also owns a variety of fretless historical banjos, some made of gourds and some of which he built himself, and some unusual collectibles which are too old and delicate to play, such as the 1860's J. Ballard banjo with a wide neck and 8 total strings, 2 short and 6 long, that he has hanging above the piano in his parlor.

Clarke Buehling and the Skirtlifters recently returned from a successful European tour, performing at the Over-Easy Bluegrass Festival in Schaffhausen, Switzerland, the Ulster American Folk Park in Northern Ireland, and 2 noontime concerts as well as the Brosella Folk & Jazz Festival in Brussels, Belgium. Coming up, Buehling will be instructing and performing at the Grandpa Jones Banjo Weekend, Sept. 2-4, at the Ozark Folk Center in Mountain View, AR; also, he and Kent Beyette will be featured at Beaver's Bend Folk Music & Craft Fair, Nov. 12-14, in Broken Bow, OK. Look for Clarke around town at the Farmer's Market, or visit [TheSkirtlifters.com](http://TheSkirtlifters.com) for more information and performance schedules.

To order "A Ragtime Episode," send \$17 (\$15 for the CD, \$2 for postage & handling) to Clarke Buehling, P.O. Box 744, Fayetteville AR 72702. The album will soon be available at [cdbaby.com](http://cdbaby.com). Clarke hopes to arrange a CD release party in Fayetteville later this fall - stay tuned! ♦

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