



COMPACT DISC REVIEW

By

Jack Rummel

*A Ragtime Episode**Clarke Buehling & The SkirtLifters**SL-2004*

Fire Bell Galop / Creole Belles / Bowery Buck / Tickle Toes / The Old Man's Dream / The Entertainer / Darktown Dandies / Palladium Rag / In a Dixie Dell / Blaze Away! / A Ragtime Episode / Carolina Tar Heel / Rag-Time Dance / Georgia Grind / Levee Pastime / Maple Leaf Rag / Sweet Corn / Hot Corn.

Long before anyone thought of creating piano rags from syncopated melodies, the five-string banjo was the star of the vaudeville stage. Plucked with the bare fingers, it remained popular from the 1880s well into the jazz age and its catchy rhythms may well have inspired a piano rag or two. It was give and take, as many early piano rags were also arranged for banjo and banjo-led groups.

That this tradition is even alive today is due almost single-handedly to the research and devotion of Clarke Buehling. Although the personnel of The SkirtLifters has altered over the years, it is Buehling that has kept the band's sound consistently aimed at this early transitional period.

The arrangements feature mainly the banjo (in its various configurations) plus violin, guitar, second banjo and occasional cello. On most selections where the violin is present it is doubling the melody in unison with the banjo. When this is then combined with some active counterpoint on the guitar, the effect is quite stunning. However, when the violin, with its inherent ability to sustain a note, attempts harmony by teaming up with the banjo, which lacks any ability to sustain, the results are less than effective (*The Entertainer* would be a case in point).

There is a Who's Who of banjo composers represented here in the likes of George Lansing (*The Old Man's Dream*), Joe Morley (*Darktown Dandies*, *Palladium Rag*), Percy Jaques (*Tickle Toes*, *In a Dixie Dell*), and Paul Eno (*A Ragtime Episode*, *Hot Corn*), but the astute ragtimer will also recognize the names of Scott Joplin (*The Entertainer*, *Rag-Time Dance*, *Maple Leaf Rag*), J.

Bodewald Lampe (*Creole Belles*), Tom Turpin (*Bowery Buck*), Ford Dabney (*Georgia Grind*) and Abe Holzmann, whose two-step *Blaze Away!* is extremely rare.

This is intended to be a period production, right down to the stilted solemnity of the performers in the cover photo. The sound quality and balance is quite good, considering the various wave lengths produced by the banjos, guitars, violin and cello. The liner notes cover the selections very well but unfortunately give no information on the band members. Clarke Buehling and The SkirtLifters have produced a fine album, preserving an oft-forgotten tradition in early American music. When it was played in those days, audiences clapped and people danced to it. You will, too.

Available for \$17.00 postpaid from Clarke Buehling, P.O. Box 744 , Fayetteville , AR 72702 .