

Edward Harry Kelly

Composer, Band and Orchestra Leader
1879-1955

by Dory DeAngelo

Kansas City's Edward Harry Kelly became a nationally recognized ragtime composer just as ragtime became the most popular music in the country. Ragtime, jazz, and musical comedy have often been called Americans' gifts to music. Ragtime gave birth to Dixieland music and contributed to early jazz. When ragtime is played on the piano, it has a 'ragged' sound because the pianist plays regular rhythmic bass with the left hand and a complex melody with the right.

Edward Kelly was born on July 11, 1879, above a saloon in the West Bottoms near the old Union Depot. He started taking piano lessons when he was in grade school, and by the time he was a teenager, he was playing in ragtime bands and composing music. He wrote a hit, "Peaceful Henry," in 1905 when he was 22 years old. Published in Kansas City, the rag became popular across the country and was recorded by bands and orchestras in this country and in the British Isles. Kelly would go on to write many popular rags, many named after locations in Kansas City such as "The Muehlebach Rag," "The Baltimore Rag," and "The Country Club Rag."

In 1906 Kelly organized his own orchestra, Kelly's Band and Orchestra. The group played at downtown's Baltimore and Muehlebach Hotels, as well as in Electric and Fairmont Parks. In 1917, when the veterans of World War I came marching home, Kelly organized and directed a 50-piece band that played at a special concert at the Convention Hall to welcome the troops home.

In 1944 Kelly and his wife moved into a house in the Northeast Kansas City neighborhood where he lived until his death on April 17, 1955. His tombstone in Mount St. Mary's Cemetery reads, "Ragtime Composer."

Sources

Finch, Brad. "E. Harry Kelly, Ragtime Composer, Band and Orchestra Leader." Unpublished mss. Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library, 1992.



"Ragtime History." The World Book Encyclopedia. Chicago: Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, 1997.

"Ragtime History." The New Oxford Companion to Music. New York: Oxford Press, 1983.

© 1999

Photo: Courtesy of The Kansas City Star.