

James Scott

Pianist, Composer, and Teacher
1885-1938

by David Conrads

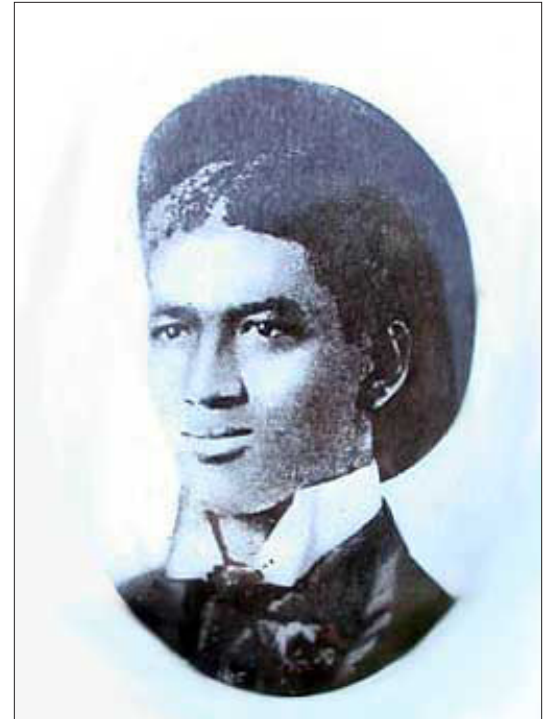
Ragtime is a uniquely American musical form and a precursor of jazz. It flourished around the turn of the century, and many of its leading practitioners had connections to Missouri. James Scott, who was born in Neosho and died in Kansas City, Kansas, was one of the biggest names in ragtime, second only to the great pianist and composer Scott Joplin.

James Scott, known as the “Little Professor,” was a piano prodigy, blessed with perfect pitch. As a boy, he took piano lessons from a local teacher in Neosho and was an accomplished pianist by the time his family moved to Ottawa, Kansas, around 1899. The family moved to Carthage, Missouri, in 1901, where James got a job at the Dumars Music Company. Dumars published Scott’s first rag, “A Summer Breeze--March and Two-Step,” in 1903 when he was 17 years old. In 1906, he traveled to St. Louis where he studied with Scott Joplin. Joplin’s publisher, the Stark Music Company, took on James Scott and published “Frog Legs” in 1906, one of his best-known compositions.

In 1914, Scott moved to Kansas City, where he taught piano and continued to write music. He was also appointed music director of a theater chain that operated the Lincoln, Eblon, and Panama theaters, all located in the thriving 18th & Vine area. He worked as a pianist, organist, arranger, and bandleader until around 1930, when silent movies were replaced by sound.

As the popularity of jazz increased through the 1920s, ragtime began to die out. Even so, Scott formed an eight-piece band that performed at dances and other venues well into the 1930s. Although he continued to write music, after 1922 he could no longer find a publisher for his work.

Scott died in Kansas City, Kansas, in 1938 and was buried in an unmarked grave in the Westlawn Cemetery. In later years, a group of ragtime enthusiasts found the grave and raised money for a headstone, which was erected in 1981.



Sources

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