Inside *The Entertainer*

Scott Joplin, 1902 — how ragtime's most famous rag actually works

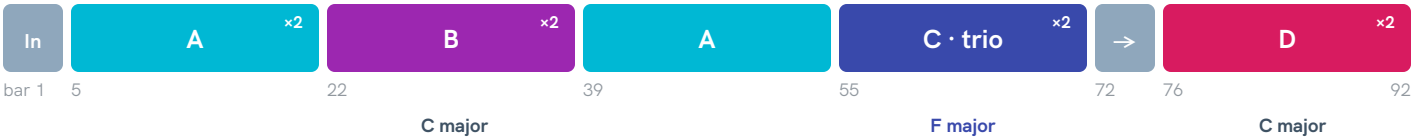
Scott Joplin was already the King of Ragtime when John Stark & Son published *The Entertainer: A Rag Time Two Step* in 1902, with a dedication "to James Brown and his Mandolin Club" — and you can hear the mandolins in its plucky, paired-note melodies. Seventy-one years later Marvin Hamlisch's arrangement for the film *The Sting* (1973) carried it to **No. 3 on the pop charts** and won an Academy Award — surely the only 72-year-old piano rag ever to become a radio hit. This handout opens the hood: the shape of the piece, the rhythm that makes it dance, the harmony underneath, and how to practice it.

THE FAMOUS SLIDE



The piece opens with this seven-note zigzag played **three times, each an octave lower** — a grand slide down the piano into the first tune. Even here Joplin is already ragging: the coral-colored note lands **between** the beats and hangs over beat 2. Learn the lick once and you have learned the whole introduction.

THE MAP OF THE RAG



Rags are built like marches: **a chain of 16-bar strains**, each with its own tune, most played twice. *The Entertainer* has four. After two strains and a reprise of A, the **C strain — the "trio" — moves to F major**, the warmer subdominant neighborhood, exactly where a march trio would go. A four-bar turnaround (page 4) slides back to C major for the final strain. Practically, this means the piece is **five little pieces sharing one groove** — you can learn them one at a time.

THREE THINGS TO HEAR ON YOUR FIRST LISTEN

1 · **The left hand never stops** — a steady oom-pah heartbeat from the first bar to the last. 2 · **Every strain has one hook that floats** — a note struck early and held over the beat (you will meet it on page 2). 3 · **The middle brightens** — when the trio arrives in F major the whole piece seems to step into the sun, and the little turnaround that follows walks it back home.

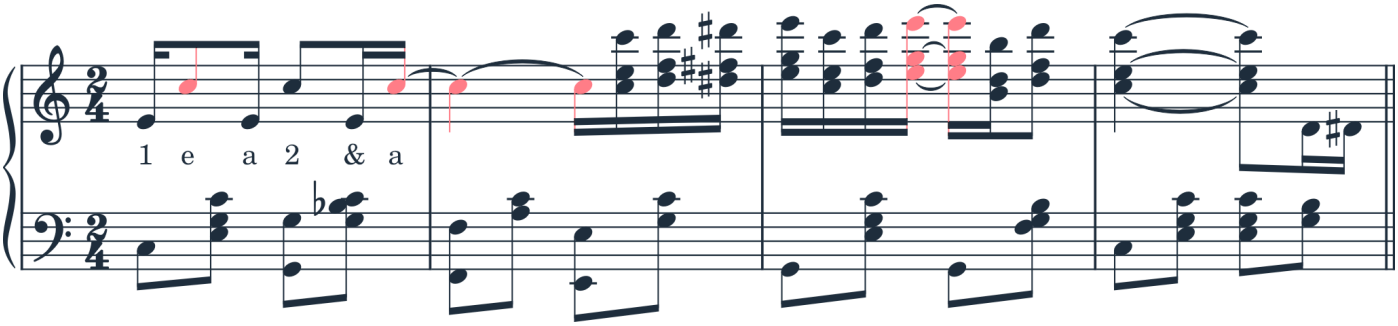
Joplin says The original sheet music is marked **"Not fast."** Joplin spent his career pleading with pianists about this — he printed on his scores: *"It is never right to play ragtime fast."* **The Entertainer smiles widest at an easy strut** — try a quarter note around 72–88, and let the syncopation, not the speed, provide the excitement.

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THE ENGINE — RAGGED TIME

"Ragtime" means ragged time. The left hand is a clock: perfectly even eighth notes, low note-chord, low note-chord. The right hand is the ragging: it places its accents **between** the clock's ticks. Here is the first phrase of the A strain — the coral-colored notes attack on the weak sixteenths ("e" and "a") and **hold on**, so the accent falls where no beat is:



bars 5–8 — count sixteenths: 1 e & a 2 e & a (Exercise 61, line J)

The biggest trick is at the end of bar 5: the last C is **tied across the barline** and rings through the whole first beat of bar 6 — the downbeat arrives, but the right hand strikes no new note on it. Your left hand marks the beat; the melody deliberately floats over it. That floating accent, used again and again throughout the piece, **is** ragtime.

CHROMATIC SPARKLE

The chord climb



Whole chords slide up by half steps: C → D → **D♯** → E. The **azure** D♯ chord belongs to no key — it is pure **passing color**, a stair-step between two chords that do belong. Joplin lands it on a weak sixteenth so it flashes past like a wink.

The wiggle



In the last strain, chords **dip a half step below themselves** and bounce back: E–G to D♯–F♯ and home again. The same lean-from-below opens the A strain: the little D–D♯ pickup that walks you up into E.

Both tricks are one idea: chromatic neighbors. Notes from outside the key lean into notes inside it, and the half-step rub is what gives ragtime its grin. Throughout this handout the **muted colors** — **azure**, **fuchsia**, **apricot** — mark notes from **outside the key**, while **coral** marks the **ragged attacks** that land off the beat.

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THE BAND IN YOUR LEFT HAND — HARMONY OF THE A STRAIN

The moment the intro's slide lands, the left hand becomes the whole band — bass player, drummer and rhythm guitar in one — and it also carries the entire harmony. Strip the melody away and the A strain (bars 5–21) is a small masterclass in how to walk a bass line. The big picture first — underneath everything, these are the **primary chords you already know**:

C$_{I}$ → C7$_{I+B♭}$ → F$_{IV}$ → C$_{I}$ → G7$_{V7}$ → C$_{I}$

PHRASE ONE, BAR BY BAR — BARS 5–8



Read the bass notes (the "ooms"): **C … G | F → E | G … G | C**. Joplin's bass is a **walker, not a jumper**: instead of leaping root to root he slips chords into **inversions** — C/E and C/G are plain C chords wearing different shoes (C/G right before G7, bars 7 and 19, is a cadential 6/4: Handout 383) — so each step is small and smooth. Two details to love: the **B♭** in bar 5 is the one note that turns C into C7, the arrow pointing at F; and the final **G–B** eighth notes are the V chord holding the door open so the strain can loop around and play again.

THE CHROMATIC STAIRCASE — BARS 17–21

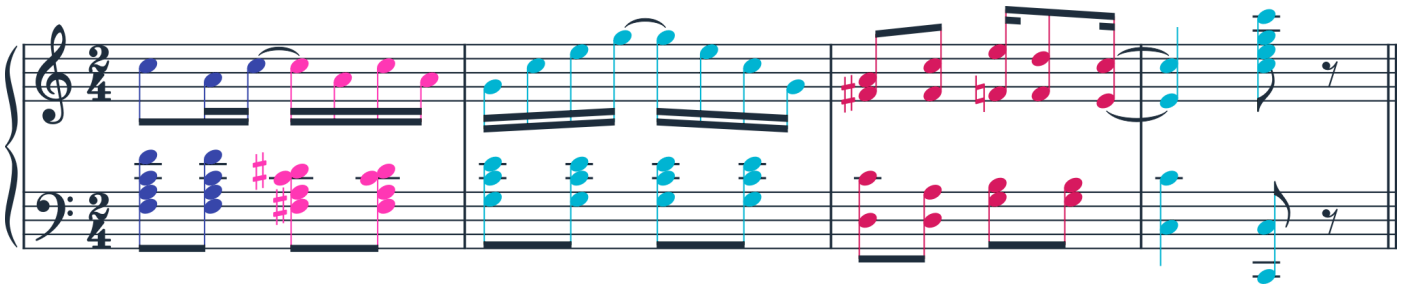


To close the strain, the bass walks **downstairs in half steps: C → B♭ → A → A♭ → G**. Each stair re-lights the harmony above it: C7 again, then F standing on A, then **Fm/A♭** — the same F chord with its **apricot A♭**, borrowed from C minor (borrowed chords: Handout 384), the single most wistful moment in the piece — landing on C/G and G7, which shut the door on C. Then, pure Joplin cheek: the bass **runs back up G–A–B** like someone taking the stairs two at a time to start over. (Phrase two has its own detour: the bass slides E → E♭ → D for a D7 that leans on G — same walking idea, aimed at the dominant.)

Steal this for your own playing: when two chords are a leap apart, look for the inversion that makes the bass step instead — and when a major chord wants to melt into minor, **lower its 3rd a half step in passing**, without changing the overall key: that one move turns F into the wistful Fm/A♭. Joplin's left hand is a complete course in smooth harmony, two eighth notes at a time.

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THE MAGIC TURNAROUND — BARS 72–75



● F — the trio's key ● F♯°7 — the slide chord ● C — home ● D7 → G7 — the dominants

How do you get from the trio's F major back home to C? Joplin walks the bass up a half step at a time — **F → F♯ → G**. The chord on F♯ is a **diminished seventh** (F♯–A–C–D♯*), the classic ragtime "slide chord": every note leans somewhere. It lands on C with G in the bass, then a **chain of dominants** — D7 into G7 — snaps the door shut on C. You will find this exact turnaround in a thousand rags, jazz tunes and show numbers.



*** about that top note.** The edition this handout follows prints it as **D♯** (left), and D♯ shows the voice-leading: it leans *up* a half step into the E of the next C chord. Stacked in thirds, though, a diminished 7th climbs by letters — F♯–A–C–**E♭** (right), four minor 3rds and the four letters F A C E. Same two black-and-white keys under your hand; only the spelling changes. Read it either way, but stack it in thirds when you want to *name* the chord.

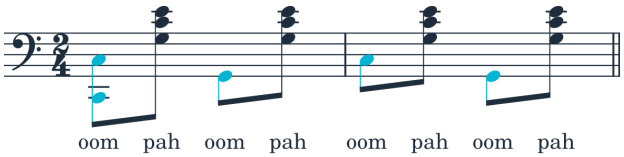
INSIDE THE TRIO · THE LEFT HAND

The trio — two mandolins



In F major the melody moves in **paired notes** — thirds and sixths — like the two mandolins of the dedication. The **azure** G♯ is another neighbor leaning into A, and the tie is the same floating syncopation as the A strain. New key, same grin.

Oom-pah — the left hand



Oom (cyan): a deep root or octave. **Pah**: a mid-keyboard chord. Keep it quiet, springy and dead-even — it is the drummer and the bass player in one hand. Practice the jump with your **eyes on the right hand**; the leap has to become blind.

Try it **A practice recipe:** 1 · Loop the left hand of bars 5–8 until the oom-pah is automatic. 2 · Right hand alone, counting sixteenths out loud — whisper the coral-colored notes louder than the beat. 3 · Hands together at half speed, *not fast*, no pedal — ragtime is crisp. 4 · Learn one strain per week in playing order A, B, C, D; the intro and turnaround are two afternoons. In five weeks you own the most famous rag ever written.

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