



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR  
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**Mayor Emanuel Interviews Ragtime Artist Reginald R. Robinson on "Chicago Stories" Podcast**

On this week's episode of "Chicago Stories," Mayor Emanuel welcomed ragtime pianist, composer, and scholar Reginald R. Robinson to learn about his unlikely career as a self-taught artist, ragtime's place in American music history, and what it was like to receive the MacArthur "Genius" grant. Reginald also treated Mayor Emanuel to a rendition of one of his own works, "Sweet Envy."

Born in 1972, Reginald grew up in Chicago's West Side and South Side Neighborhoods, and first encountered ragtime after hearing Scott Joplin's "The Entertainer" during a 7th-grade school presentation called "From Bach to Bebop."

He was immediately hooked. Yet, while Reginald is known for being self-taught artist, it wasn't by design.

"I was not trying to be self-taught—I wanted a teacher—but my mom and dad couldn't afford that," Reginald told Mayor Emanuel.

Fortunately, Reginald's mother was able to obtain a small keyboard for her son, and then later a full-sized piano. "I was so happy about that, because it was 88-keys," Reginald recalled, "I was like, 'man, I'm really going to teach myself.'"

In addition to being a performer and composer, Reginald has also become one of the country's preeminent ragtime scholars.

"What I'm really interested in is finding the unknown," Reginald told Mayor Emanuel. "These are black musicians, they traveled around the country, even had music published and did theater, but they are long forgotten."

Part of the reason is that—while some of their music had been recorded by popular singers—as composers they themselves weren't given credit.

To find who they were, Reginald has delved into newspapers from the day. "When you look at newspapers, you see where this composer, that song, is listed under their name," Reginald said. "And I've uncovered some long-forgotten musicians."

Be sure to tune into the full episode as Reginald tells Mayor Emanuel about ragtime's pivotal role in the history of Jazz, the highs and lows of his own career, Scott Joplin's creative drive, and some of the lesser-known ragtime artists everyone should check out.

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*Additional Quotes from Reginald R. Robinson:*

**On Ragtime and Jazz:**

*Ragtime has a character where it has all these emotions that are in the music as you play it. Jazz is different. You put the emotions in as you play. And the chords, basically the chords are the basis for improvisation.*

*What I've realized is that ragtime was progressing to what maybe is called jazzed. It was a way that the music was played. It was leading to jazz. It was jazz, but it was an early form of jazz.*

**On the Development of Ragtime:**

I often tell people that a lot of those musicians, people like Joe Jordan, were writing, you can hear, you can look at his ragtime pieces from 1903, and you hear him in 1929, his ragtime pieces in 1903 sound like music from 1903. But, in 1929, he sounds like musicians from 1929 when you actually hear him on record playing . . . it matured that way.

**On Experiencing Live Ragtime:**

*Mostly what's popular in this city is blues, modern blues, modern jazz, and that kind of style, I think, as far as jazz or classical, I think that's more so what people want to hear in clubs. And I was looking like "people seem like they want to really hear music that they talk over." I'll go in these clubs, I'll see musicians, I'm blown away. They can play. I mean, they can really play. And everybody's talking and drinking. Like, not even listening to the music. But, ragtime demands attention. You can't just talk like that.*

**On His Creative Process:**

*I'm not one of these musicians who can write the blues when I'm having the blues. I can't do that. I have to be happy to write sad music. As long as I'm happy, I can write any kind of emotions in music. But I can't be struggling, not able to live and be concerned about bills . . . I can't write music in the dark!*

**On Scott Joplin:**

*Scott Joplin was trying to push the boundaries. And that's what I realized about his writing. He was never satisfied with whatever was going on. I mean, listen to his music. He was an entertainer, he wanted to out-do it, do something that people had never done before. So, he was always pushing forward. All the way up to his death in 1917. His music kept getting more and more advanced. And it became known as jazz.*