Glenn Jenks

Volume I

1972–1986

LINER NOTES

Aaron Robinson

A RECORDING BY CORTE SWEARINGEN

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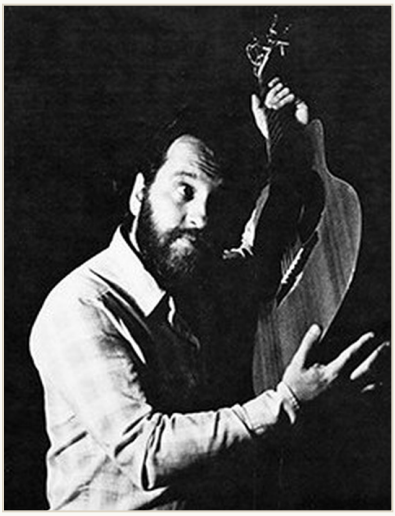
About the Works



Glenn Jenks composed ragtime works for the piano from 1972 until his untimely death in 2016. Yet very little is known as to the stories behind each work's creation except for the occasional dedication; and even rarer commentary from the dedicatee. Jenks did not start dedicating his compositions until 1975 with one of his most famous rags The Harbour Rag; which he dedicated to Jim and Reeny Gilbert, owners of the Harbour Inn in Camden, Maine, where he used to play and sing folk music in the 1970s. There was a slight "tip of the hat" given to Jenks's favorite ragtime composer, James Scott, to whom he dedicated his Bachelor Two-Step in 1974; but this was more of an acknowledgement to Jenks's own clever attempt in writing a rag that closely mirrored the sound and feel of the great master - which he does brilliantly.

Out of the handful of dedications Jenks attributed his ragtime works to over the years, only a dozen remembrances were collected to accompany each piece for the compilation of complete works for piano published in 2020. With a span of over 50 years, we are left with a wanting of understanding as to why Jenks chose the titles he did for each of his 34 ragtime works for piano or the recipients of his dedications. What is left to be said for the vast body of work lies within the musical analysis of the compositional structure and harmonic style of each piece - and the brilliant mind behind them.

Red Beard Rag

1972

Written in 1972 when Jenks was 25 years old and known primarily as a folk guitarist and singer in piano-bars and honky-tonk saloons throughout New England, Red Beard Rag is simplistic in its harmonic and rhythmic structure found within its first two strains; reminiscent of Jenks ragtime performances on guitar. It is the exciting change from C to A-flat in the TRIO section that gives us a glimpse of Jenks's masterful composition skills. What follows is a non-traditional set of strains starting with a C strain that utilizes a walking bass turn-around reminiscent of Joplin's Magnetic Rag, which leads into a short "breakstrain" (or sometimes called a "dogfight"). A non-repeated stand-alone strain with a charming "catch-the-beat" syncopation in the right hand brings home the final D strain in a true 3-over-4 grand ragging style.

Sincerity Rag 1974

A conventional, authentic rag in standard AA-BB-A-CC-DD form, Sincerity Rag is more a Cake-Walk than a traditional rag with notated 2/4 time signature and two heavy beats per bar. Influenced by the originators of ragtime, this rag denotes syncopations and harmonies from the turn-of-the-century works by James Scott and Scott Joplin; yet subtle hints of internal counter-harmonies start to emerge that will later become a Jenks staple. Listening to the subtle strains, as performed by Swearingen, one might think it a parlor rag written in 1904 rather than 1974.

The Florida Rag 1974

The introduction and first strain pays tribute to Joseph Lamb's Bohemia Rag; while the B strain begins to display the virtuosity of Jenks's piano skills and his skillful writing for the instrument. The playful ascending off-the-beat arpeggiations and turn-around phrases demand an experienced performer. Strains C and D once again pay homage to the classic rags of Lamb.

Bachelor's Two-Step 1974

Jenks was keen to say that he was a "composer first and a pianist second." As a composer he wrote entirely away from the piano and only brought his compositions to the keyboard once they were completely finished. In this way he was not influenced by what he could play, but guided by what the music led him to compose. With his fourth rag, Jenks already proves he is a master of the ragtime genre. Dedicating it to his favorite ragtime composer James Scott, the work itself sounds and reads as if the great ragtime composer wrote it himself. From the 8va echo effect in the C strain to the repeated B strain as the final strain (musical mannerisms synonymous with Scott's writing style), Bachelor's Two-Step immortalizes Jenks as a great ragtime composer.

The Spice Box 1974

Curiously named The Spice Box, this rag is one of 12 original ragtime compositions Jenks recorded on his 1988 album Ragtime Alchemy. In keeping with the title, this charming spice-filled rag contains unconventional dotted jazz-style rhythms not usually found in ragtime. With a fast paced tempo marking of 72 to the quarter note and instructions to "Swing where indicated," the juxtaposition of straight against swing in the B-strain sets up the lively chromatic ascending triplet run in the TRIO section perfectly. In Jenks's own recording, he improvises a flourish of embellishments on the repeat of the final strain to finish out the rag with a pinch of spice. Swearingen's light classical approach paired with a novelty ragtime zest gives it just the right flavor.

The Harbour Rag 1975

Dedicated to Jim and Reeny Gilbert, proprietors of The Camden Harbour Inn in Camden, Maine, where Jenks performed regularly with fellow musicians throughout the 1970s. Following his Planxty Jim Stewart, The Harbour Rag is Jenks's most performed, recorded and recognized work for piano. Employing classic ragtime conventions, the music is thoroughly Jenks. Structured with an AA-BB-A-CC form, an extended dogfight breakstrain reintroduces strain B as a final fortissimo strain in the manner of a grand Sousa march.

A Ragtime Seabreeze 1975

A Ragtime Seabreeze was dedicated to Nick Apollonio, a lifelong friend and fellow pub musician at "The Thirsty Whale", a tavern at The Camden Harbour Inn. As Apollonio recalls: "We would all gather at the tavern and sing folk songs and sea shanties with Gordon Bok, Cliff Haslam, Tom Judge and Bob Stuart. I first recorded with Glenn back in 1979. He wrote many fiddle tunes for me - which were great fun to play ... these were good times." In 1974, Jenks called Apollonio seeking a rental in the Camden area for under $150. "Good luck!" Apollonio replied, and hung up. Shortly after, he remembered 9 Bonnie Brae: the house Jenks would live in for over 40 years until his death in 2016. "Maybe that's why he dedicated A Ragtime Seabreeze to me," Apollonio once remembered. As for the personal note that Jenks incorporated in the second half of the C-strain: "Just a zephyr" - a zephyr is a "soft, gentle breeze"; and Rockport harbor has a lovely sea breeze which is very nice for the Rockport Opera House on a hot night. Jenks was very instrumental in helping Apollonio found the Penobscot Folk Festival in July 1972; which drew musicians from across the country and Canada for over 25 years.

Pacific Coast Rag 1975

With only a year and four rags separating Florida Rag from Pacific Coast Rag, Jenks reveals a skillful command of harmony and syncopated counterpoint that is "nonpareil". The playful cross rhythms in the final D strain and the inventive turn-arounds that are now synonymous with the composer's style, is clear by 1975. Jenks is in top form with the standard AA-BB-A-CC-DD rag. Whereas Jenks's 1988 recording is direct and fast-paced, Swearingen cradles the subtle nuances of the writing and brings out the tender images of a simpler time around the turn of the 20th century.

The New Black Eagle Rag 1975

This piece was written for the New Black Eagle Jazz Band, a New Orleans style jazz band founded in 1971 and based in New England. Both Jenks and Max Morath wrote a New Black Eagle Rag; and both jokingly thought theirs was better than the others. Jenks's New Black Eagle is not written for the piano but more a piano transcription of the orchestral composition composed for the 7-piece jazz band. The left hand showcases the solo capabilities of the trombone; while the right hand encompasses the upper registers with the clarinet, trumpet and flute. A charming TRIO sections introduces an even, steady, duple rhythm that allows a bouncy syncopated bass to play off it. The final strain builds from a small theme to a full New Orleans jazz cadence.

The Black Preacher 1975

Dedicated to American minister and 1960s Civil Rights Movement leader Rev. James Bevel, this AA-BB-A-CC-DD form rag is the first of Jenks's works to incorporate a dotted 16th "swing" in the minor key. An early example of off-setting the regular 2/4 beat is shown in the very first strain where Jenks emphasizes the left hand strongly from the up-beat of the previous measure into the down-beat of the next. The teasing of an approaching "walking bass line" throughout the Rag brings the element to an all-and-out showcase in the final strain where the left hand displays a turn-around from the dominant to the 7th back to the dominant with an authentic swing style boogie-woogie bass. Jenks was in his element whenever he performed this rag and pulled all the stops out when he "brought it home" in the final few measures.

The Exemplar 1976

Simply attributed: "For Max - THE EXEMPLAR", this rag is a true "Classic" rag as defined in the original years of the ragtime era by Scott Joplin's publisher, John Stark. It is a full, rich and perfectly structured work, implementing all styles of elevated ragtime. One would be hard pressed to find a better written rag to set the form than The Exemplar. The C strain embodies the unrivaled talents of ragtime composer and arranger Artie Matthews with its left hand octave work; while the final D Strain represents the classical musings of Robert Hampton.

Roulette Rag 1977

Lesser known among the Jenks's rag, Roulette Rag is a masterful "novelty" work for piano filled with humor and agility. The music evokes a gambling establishment with a pianist providing background entertainment for the gamblers. An AA-BB-A-CC-DD rag, it demands a "hold on to your hats" performance in the final strain. Instructions to "Place Your Bets!" from the composer readies the pianist for a fast-paced 5 over 2 cross-the-bar polyrhythm symbolizing a trackball speeding around the fast spinning roulette wheel. With multiple repeats marked "Faster Still" and "sempre 8va" the music ends in a blinding dizzy as a final full tremolo fermata chord rings out, symbolizing the trackball coming to rest in a roulette pocket.

A Ragtime Trilogy 1986

This trilogy is the first of two musical trilogies; The second being TRISKELION published in 1993. It is comprised of three individual works: French Lace, Desperation Tango, and The Ragtime Hurricane. Each a masterwork all their own, the writing exhibits an orchestral flare for the piano that spans far beyond the mere rag confines; utilizing the entire keyboard with a virtuosic command and technical voicing of the instrument not usually found in standard ragtime music.

I. French Lace

("A Concert Waltz in 'Ragged Time' where in Scott Joplin meets the famous Johann Strauss") - This frilly bon-bon calls upon a century's old musical trick of "ragging" the classics. Jenks brilliantly references several well-known waltzes of Johann Strauss II; giving them a syncopated waltz treatment for the concert pianist. Jenks became known for "ragging the classics" with later works such as Gymnoraggy (1993) and his skillfully clever Stolen Memories (2003).

II. Desperation Tango

(or, "You Think You Have Problems") - A musical pathos, this tango descends to an almost breaking point, weeping by chromatic half-steps before returning back with a habanera-like flourish to its minor dominant. The tempo marking for this piece is "Grave"; which next to "Larghissimo" is the slowest tempo one can play in music. Jenks's original recording of the tango is almost tongue-in-cheek and fits in well with the subtitle: (or, "You Think You Have Problems"). It is difficult not to smile at the thought that this music is crying out: "Oh woe is me!"

III. The Ragtime Hurricane

One of Jenks's fastest ragtime works, this rag clocks in at a whirling 124 to the quarter note. As the title suggests, it is a tour-de-force to perform; and does not let the pianist rest for even a second throughout the rag. At times, pressing the performer to run the keyboard in ascending arpeggiations spanning over four octaves, while introducing a 16th-note walking bass line in the final strain, The Ragtime Hurricane proudly holds ranks with the handful of performance encore pieces that only the most experienced ragtime pianists can play.

The Ragtime Hermit Thrush

1986

Dedicated to Amelia Lamb, Patricia Lamb Conn and to the memory of Joseph Lamb, (without whose music this rag could not have been written), Jenks uses musical mimicry to imitate the hermit thrush within the first strain, blending its call elegantly within the ragtime form. Revealing further a masterful artistry of inner-harmony and multi-voiced syncopated themes, Jenks weaves both polymetrically together. Subtitled (An Ornithological Serenade), Jenks was well known as an expert ornithologist and dedicated this rag to Amelia Lamb - Joseph Lamb's wife - and their daughter, Patricia, in honor of Lamb's own: Ragtime Nightingale (1915).

Elegiac Rag 1986

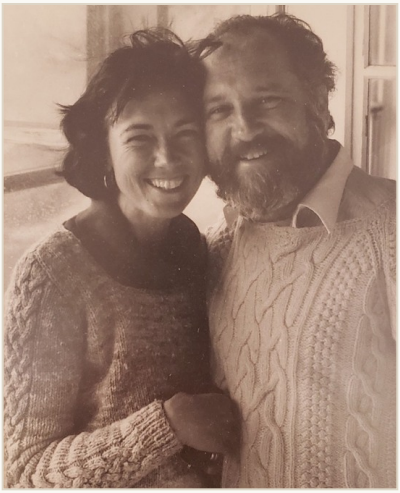
Set in the solemn key of B-minor, there is nothing standard about this rag. Placing the syncopation in the left hand while weaving an intricate series of chordal changes leading from B-minor to Eb-minor, A-7th to D, G-7 to F-7 back to B-minor, cements Jenks's standing among serious composers. With an AA-BB-A format, the first and second endings of the C strain seamlessly bring each cadence either back to the beginning or on to the D strain with another series of inventive chord changes. Jenks mysteriously repeats the B strain once more before adding a Coda that floats ethereally up the keyboard until a fermata rest places the final chord below in a tender B-major resolve. This non-traditional ending can be described perfectly with words by ragtime historian David A. Jasen who once wrote of Scott Joplin's Coda to his Magnetic Rag: the "smiling little coda". Swearingen chose well to complete Volume I with this rag.

02 / GLENN A. JENKS · 1947–2016

About the Composer

Glenn A. Jenks (1947 - 2016) was born in Boston, Massachusetts. Early photographs reveal that music was a powerful influence with images capturing the young Jenks at age 2 seated at the piano, hands poised correctly over the keyboard and conducting Rossini in front of the family phonograph. Growing up in Wellesley, where he graduated from local schools, as a teen Jenks studied at the Wellesley branch of the New England Conservatory and went on to graduate Phi Beta Kappa with a degree in music from Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana.

Between 1975 and 1978, Jenks joined forces with singer-songwriter and comedian Jud Strunk, touring for three years across North America. He performed with such acts as Manhattan Transfer, Dick Hyman, Gordon Bok and Andy Williams before launching his own solo performing career in 1978 when he released his first album "Antidote". During the 1980s, Jenks was an integral figure in the New Vaudeville Revival, performing as pianist with the New England Revue and serving as a key member for the annual Ragtime Festivals. From 1999-2000, he produced the Annual Harvest Ragtime Revue at the Camden Opera House in Camden, Maine where leading ragtime and vaudeville performers of the day were presented; including Dick Zimmerman, Mimi Blais, Max Morath, Tony Montanaro and Susan Boyce.



Settling at 9 Bonnie Brae in the quaint little harbor town of Camden, Maine in 1975 where he lived for over 40 years; Jenks enjoyed performing in piano-bars and honky-tonk saloons across New England with top folk artists. The most memorable establishment was "The Thirsty Whale" at the Camden Harbour Inn, where, in 1981, he met his wife-to-be: Faith P. Getchell. A respected ornithologist, botany specialist and expert rosarian, Jenks held guided tours of neighboring rose gardens throughout the area and founded the annual Rose Day celebration at the Merryspring Nature Center.

As a composer, Jenks wrote - in addition to dozens of sophisticated works in the ragtime idiom - classical chambers works, art songs, orchestral and choral works, and pieces for solo piano in various musical genre; including a string quartet, piano concerto, collection of waltzes, hundreds of folk songs, and a folio of original maxixes and choros (Brazilian tangos). As a recording artist, Jenks released 11 albums: Antidote (1979), Background Music (1981), Ragtime Project - Volume One (1983), Ragtime Project - Volume Two (1985), Ragtime Alchemy (1988), American Beauties (1991), Easy Winners (1994), Ragtime Bigtime (1995), Invitation to the Danza (1999), Ragtime Sweets (1999), Spider in the Tub (2007). As a musicologist, he lectured on the history of early jazz and ragtime around the United States.

In 2019, the Glenn Jenks Ragtime Revue was founded and premiered at the Camden Opera House in honor of Jenks. It revived the tradition that Jenks started 30 years prior, bringing nationally known artists to midcoast Maine together in "song, dance, humor and ragtime." The Revue also sponsors an annual scholarship to a Maine-based young artist who has chosen a future career in music. The complete printed collection of ragtime works for piano by Jenks was released in 2020; compiled of 35 piano pieces and 2 rags for guitar.

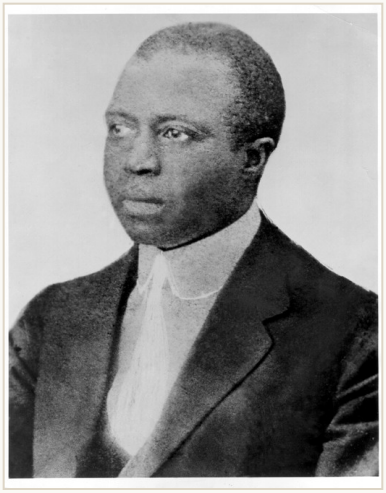
When Glenn Jenks died unexpectedly in 2016, a great loss was felt throughout the ragtime community. Legendary composer and pianist Max Morath wrote: "We have a way of saying upon the loss of a friend or colleague: 'He was a good guy.' Glenn Jenks was one of the 'good guys,' and so much more. He was a generous and joyful man - a man of great talent, eager to share it with others." It is remembered that when heated debates broke out at Ragtime Festivals, it was Jenks - the most trusted and neutral arbitrator - who was sought out by those in disagreement to serve as mediator.

Jenks shared a life motto with ragtime legend Eubie Blake, who once said: "Be sure you take the time and smell the roses."

03 / THE RECORDING

About the Album

Recording the complete works of any composer is a feat that is held in high esteem and with great regard. In the classical world, pianists may focus on a specific element and choose to record a singular form; such as the etude, nocturne or prelude and fugue. In the world of Ragtime, to record the complete works of a single composer is all-encompassing for that genre: Rags, Cakewalks, Two-Steps, Marches, Waltzes, Songs, Novelty, et al.



Only a handful of pianists have released the complete recordings of the works by the "Big Three": Scott Joplin, James Scott and Joseph Lamb. Joshua Rifkin made history with his collection of 3-Volumes of works by Scott Joplin in 1970 for Nonesuch Records; placing the ragtime composer in the category of Classical music for the first time ever and earning Rifkin two Grammy Award nominations. Richard Zimmerman followed shortly thereafter in 1974 with the complete works of Joplin; including all the composer's songs and even selections from his opera "Treemonisha". Fewer still have recorded the complete works of Joseph Lamb and James Scott; with pianist Guido Neilson recording both in 1999 and 2001 respectively. Until the Ragtime Revival in the 1970s, no other ragtime composer had contributed substantially enough to the repertoire to warrant a complete recording compilation.

Then came the next generation of composers and pianists who valiantly took up the torch and continued the tradition of writing and performing ragtime; but with a modern sound and present-day approach. Composers such as William Bolcom and Max Morath; who combined the early ragtime era style of writing with a modern flare that called upon contemporary composing techniques such as complex polyrhythm and even atonality; and required a high degree of performance ability only found at the conservatory level.

Every so often, the occasional ragtime work of these modern greats would appear on record or in the concert hall; such as Bolcom's "Graceful Ghost Rag" or Morath's "Cripple Creek Suite". But it would take another three to four decades before these giants of modern day ragtime would see their complete works for piano recorded and released. Bolcom's complete ragtime works were first recorded in 1999 by

pianist John Murphy and then again in 2022 by Marc-Andre Hamelin; and Morath's complete works were released in 2014.

In 2024, American pianist Corte Swearingen joined the ranks of world class pianists by taking on the monumental task of recording the entire library of ragtime works for piano by Glenn Jenks. Scheduled to be released in two volumes, Volume I presents the early years from 1972, when Jenks was first experimenting with the form, to 1986 when he was hitting his stride as an experienced composer not only in the genre of ragtime but within his own style and voice that was clearly unique and distinctive.

As a pianist, Swearingen learned ragtime the way most pianists of a certain generation did: pre-PDF internet downloads, one was inclined to reach out to the composer directly via snail mail, request a certain piece or folio of music, enclose a check, and hopefully within a few weeks: receive the music in the post. Such was the way he became familiar with the ragtime works of William Albright, William Bolcom, Hal Isbitz, Donald Ashwander, Max Morath, and of course, Glenn Jenks. The folio he received from Jenks was "A Garden of Ragtime", a publication by Squanlake Music containing Jenks 12 rags. Upon receiving the folio, Swearingen was instantly taken by the harmonic sophistication and beautiful syncopated melodies.

Starting in 2021, a series of online exchanges between Jenks colleague and long-time friend, Aaron Robinson, led Swearingen to consider recording a few pieces for his on-going recording project: the American Piano Music series. Before long, a "few pieces" became all 34 ragtime works for piano, including the collaboration with fellow ragtime enthusiasts Ed Berlin, Wally Rose and Peter Lundberg, known as "Sedalia Joys".

Swearingen spent two full years immersed in the music of Jenks. His personal upbringing and musical studies aided in his understanding of the musical style and writing. At the early age of 15, Swearingen began his musical studies at the St. Louis Conservatory of Music. His dream was to become a concert pianist; but he changed his mind at the last minute to study physics and mathematics at the University of Illinois. When it came to ragtime, a chance encounter at Walt Disney World in 1978, when he was just starting to learn piano at 10 years old and the advanced world of Chopin and Liszt were at his fingertips, placed Swearingen on Main Street U.S.A where he heard piano music coming from a little spot called "Coke Corner" (now "Casey's Corner"). Although unfamiliar to his ear, little Corte was enthralled by what he was hearing, and no amount of coaxing from his parents to go on rides could pull him away

from that piano. Standing there for a full hour until the piano player went on break, little Corte resigned himself then and there to go home and demand that his piano teacher introduce him to ragtime.

Over the years, although expertly proficient at the keyboard, piano was not a consistency due to work and raising two daughters. It wasn't until 2018 that a geographical move allowed Swearingen to revisit his musical endeavors and focus his interests on American music: in particular, the music of lesser known composers such as Amy Beach, Florence Price, Judith Lang Zaimont and Donald Ashwander.

It is this combination of Classical training and technical virtuosity, along with his life-long appreciation and love for ragtime music, that places Swearingen as a top interpreter and authentic expert of Jenks's ragtime works for piano; which, in turn, combine the same two elements. Swearingen's diligent conviction, tireless devotion and meticulous attention to the study of Jenks's music reveals that there are times while listening to this album that one not only hears the composer himself but is elevated to a new height of performance and level of personal uniqueness that presents a rendition unlike anything heard before.

Glenn Jenks was unsettled when someone referred to him as: "just a ragtime composer". With this complete collection (Volume I) performed superbly by Corte Swearingen, neither Jenks nor Swearingen will ever be associated with the word: "just". This album stands alongside the greats: not only the great composers, but the great pianists, as well. It will introduce the music of Glenn Jenks to whole new generations for decades to come; and re-introduce the genius to those who remember him with great fondness and hold him in such high admiration.

— Aaron Robinson