

DONALD ASHWANDER

The Complete Works for Solo Piano

VOLUME I • 1965–1967



Corte Swearingen

piano

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FROM THE PIANIST

A Personal Introduction

I first encountered the music of Donald Ashwander in the summer of 1996 through a small advertisement in *The Mississippi Rag*. At the time, *The Mississippi Rag* was a monthly printed newsletter devoted to ragtime and related forms of American piano music. Long before social media or streaming platforms, it served as a lifeline for composers, performers, collectors, and listeners who cared deeply about this music.

Each issue arrived by mail, filled with concert announcements, record reviews, scholarship, and - most tantalizing of all - small classified ads offering sheet music from composers whose names were often known only within a narrow circle.

One of those ads caught my attention. It was for a folio of piano music by a composer I had never heard of: Donald Ashwander. I sent away for the music without knowing quite what to expect.

I later learned that the very existence of the folio was thanks to the dedication of Donald's sister, Judy Ashwander-Moore. In the years following his death, Judy was instrumental in championing his work and ensuring his music was preserved in print, overseeing the production of two wonderful folios that gave his music a life beyond his lifetime.

When the folio arrived and I began playing through the pieces, I was immediately struck by the breadth and depth of what I found on the page. These were not stylistic exercises or period imitations. Ashwander's music had a strong melodic identity, an unforced sense of rhythm, and - most impressively to me - a left hand that resisted the stock 'oom-pah' patterns of early twentieth-century ragtime.

At the time, I had no way of knowing how important that discovery would eventually become. Like many pianists drawn to this repertoire, I filed Ashwander away as one of those composers I admired and returned to periodically. His pieces stayed with me - not just as clever constructions, but as music that felt deeply musical, humane, and sincere.

Donald Ashwander had passed away in 1994, two years before I first encountered his music. Like many composers working outside the commercial mainstream, his death did not bring with it a renewed interest in his work. His music, for the most part, receded from view, known primarily to a small circle of pianists and listeners who had encountered it by chance, much as I had.

Fast forward twenty-three years. In 2019, I launched a website devoted exclusively to American piano music. As I began building out composer profiles, I returned to Ashwander and quickly realized how little information was available about him. For a composer whose music showed such confidence and individuality, he remained surprisingly obscure. That curiosity turned into a kind of detective work.

After some searching, I was put in touch with Sharon Moore, Donald Ashwander's niece - a remarkable singer and musician in her own right, and a collaborator with Donald on the 1981 album *Particular People*. Sharon generously filled in biographical details, shared family stories, and helped place Donald's music within the broader arc of his life. Over time, we corresponded occasionally by email, and I began to feel a growing responsibility not just to the music, but to its preservation.

Around this same period, I started recording Ashwander's piano works and posting them on YouTube. The response was immediate and encouraging. Listeners were drawn to the music's lyricism and rhythmic vitality, often remarking that they were hearing something familiar yet distinct - a voice that felt rooted in tradition without sounding bound by it.

A PERSONAL INTRODUCTION · CONTINUED

Donald Ashwander occupies an important place within the continuum of American vernacular piano music. While many of his compositions fall comfortably within the ragtime lineage, his output extends well beyond it. He also wrote a substantial body of folk-influenced piano music - works without words that nevertheless seem to sing.

Like contemporaries such as Max Morath and William Bolcom, Ashwander understood this tradition not as a museum piece, but as a living language, capable of absorbing new ideas while remaining true to its origins. His music feels conversational rather than performative, more interested in expression than display.

The idea of recording Donald Ashwander's complete works for solo piano developed gradually, and perhaps with a bit of naïveté. I did not yet understand the scope of what I was proposing. That understanding came into focus in July of 2024, when I traveled to Gulf Shores, Alabama, at the invitation of Sharon Moore and Donald's sister, Judy Ashwander-Moore. The purpose of the visit was straightforward but daunting: to go through Donald Ashwander's handwritten manuscripts and locate every piece he wrote for solo piano.

What we found exceeded all expectations. After a full day spent sorting through manuscripts, sketches, and scores, we identified seventy complete compositions for solo piano - many of which had never been performed, recorded, or published. It was nothing short of a gold mine. Here was a body of work that revealed a composer of remarkable consistency and imagination, writing with urgency and fluency across decades, largely outside the spotlight - and no longer here to advocate for it himself.

The discovery of Donald Ashwander's manuscripts changed my understanding of his work in a fundamental way. What I had once known as a handful of admired pieces revealed itself as a sustained, deeply personal body of music - written steadily, purposefully, and with remarkable clarity of voice. This was not a composer working sporadically or experimentally, but one who knew exactly what he wanted to say at the piano.

This recording marks the beginning of an effort to bring that voice fully into the present. It is the first of four volumes devoted to Ashwander's complete works for solo piano, and it focuses on a particularly concentrated period of creativity: the years 1965 to 1967. In those years, Ashwander composed seventeen substantial piano works - each distinct, carefully shaped, and revealing another facet of his musical language.

Rather than treating these pieces as historical artifacts, I have approached them as living music - meant to be played, heard, and absorbed on their own terms. What follows is not a survey, but an encounter: seventeen moments in which melody and rhythm meet with quiet confidence, inviting the listener into Ashwander's world, one piece at a time.

Corte Swearingen

FROM THE ASHWANDER FAMILY

A Note from the Ashwander Family

After Donald's death in 1994, his family undertook the task of preserving his music by assembling two special sheet music folios - collections of selected works carefully prepared in Donald's own hand. He had meticulously written these scores using fountain pen and ink on delicate onion paper, and the resulting folios were both visually striking and musically rich. Even so, they represented only a portion of the full scope of his output.

Years later, pianist Corte Swearingen reached out to us in search of these folios, and what began as a simple inquiry gradually grew into a meaningful and deeply valued collaboration. Corte has become a devoted champion of Donald's music - not only through his appreciation of its distinctive and varied character, but through his own sensitive and thoughtful performances in recordings and videos.

His work has been a constant source of pride and inspiration for our family. We are profoundly grateful for the care, artistry, and respect he brings to Donald's music, and we believe Donald himself would have felt the same.

We hope you enjoy these recordings as much as we do.

*Sharon Moore, Donald Ashwander's niece
Judy Moore and Eva Lynn Odom, Donald Ashwander's sisters*

THE COMPOSER

About Donald Ashwander

Donald Ashwander (July 17, 1929 – October 26, 1994) was an American composer and pianist whose work made a significant and distinctive contribution to 20th-century piano music, especially within the ragtime and related idioms. Though his name has not always been as widely recognized as some of his contemporaries, those who know his music recognize a voice that is both deeply rooted in tradition and refreshingly original.

Born in Birmingham, Alabama, Ashwander grew up on a farm near Hanceville and began piano studies as a young student. After high school he continued his musical education at Sacred Heart College and Birmingham Southern College, and later attended the Manhattan School of Music in New York City, where he focused primarily on piano performance and theory.

Ashwander's musical path was unconventional. He was never drawn to the dominant academic or commercial styles of his time; instead, he gravitated toward the breadth of America's musical heritage – from ragtime and folk to gospel and popular song. This wide-ranging interest informed his compositional voice, which blends infectious rhythm, lyricism, and a uniquely expressive harmony.

In the mid-1960s, Ashwander's music began to attract wider attention through his friendship with author and critic Rudi Blesh, whose influential book *They All Played Ragtime* included two of Ashwander's early piano rags, *Friday Night* and *Business in Town*. These works helped establish Ashwander as a leading figure in what came to be known as the contemporary ragtime movement – a generation of composers who respected the legacy of Scott Joplin and others while expanding the form's expressive possibilities.

From 1966 until his death in 1994, Ashwander served as musical director and resident composer for The Paper Bag Players, an innovative New York children's theatre troupe. In that role he contributed not only original compositions but theatrical energy and instrumentational creativity, integrating piano with electric harpsichord, kazoos, slide whistles, rhythm boxes, and other sounds that helped define the group's distinctive musical character.

Critics and fellow musicians have noted Ashwander's melodic gift and his ability to integrate memory and imagination into music that feels both nostalgic and fresh. His work often evokes a deep sense of place and personality, drawing from the rhythms of American life yet never feeling stylized or derivative.

Ashwander died suddenly in 1994 while preparing to perform with The Paper Bag Players. In the years since his passing, musicians, scholars, and listeners have worked to ensure that his keyboard music – much of it previously unavailable – can finally be heard, studied, and appreciated as a meaningful part of America's musical landscape.

SEVENTEEN COMPOSITIONS · 1965–1967

Track Notes

A composer finding his voice.

The works on this first volume trace an extraordinary three-year period in which Ashwander transformed classic ragtime, folk memory, theatrical gesture, and the sounds of New York and Alabama into a language unmistakably his own.

TRACK or

Friday Night

1965

Friday Night occupies a pivotal place in Donald Ashwander's career: it was the first piano rag in which he felt he had fully found a musical language of his own. Ashwander later recalled finishing the piece on a Friday evening in New York and, on impulse the next morning, telephoning ragtime historian Rudi Blesh. He even attempted to play the new rag over the telephone before the two agreed that music deserved a better introduction. Their meeting the following day began one of the most important friendships of Ashwander's life.

Firmly grounded in classic ragtime, Friday Night never sounds like a nostalgic imitation. Its contrasting strains are supported by a buoyant left-hand pulse and crisp, inventive syncopation, yet within that familiar framework Ashwander creates a strikingly varied emotional landscape. Spirited passages carry the expectancy of an evening beginning, while gentler episodes introduce lyricism and a touch of introspection. Subtle harmonic turns and playful rhythmic displacement continually refresh the music as it moves forward.

The piece quickly became one of Ashwander's calling cards. Friday Night and Business in Town were included in the later edition of Blesh and Harriet Janis's influential *They All Played Ragtime*, placing Ashwander's contemporary work directly beside the classic ragtime tradition. In 1974, Kenneth MacMillan also used Friday Night in the Royal Ballet production *Elite Syncopations* at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.

Its vitality comes not from speed or display, but from the natural flow of its melodies and the lift of its rhythms. Friday Night is both an affectionate continuation of classic ragtime and an opening declaration of Ashwander's mature compositional voice.

TRACK 02

The Ragtime Pierrot

1965

The Ragtime Pierrot is one of Ashwander's earliest explorations of ragtime and one of the clearest examples of the theatrical imagination that would later serve him so well with *The Paper Bag Players*. The title evokes Pierrot, the white-faced figure of pantomime and commedia dell'arte - a character traditionally suspended between comedy and melancholy. That same emotional duality seems to inhabit Ashwander's music.

The piece begins with a graceful, almost tiptoeing quality, as though its central character has just stepped onto a stage. Its melodies are lyrical and poised, sometimes playful and sometimes quietly wistful. Syncopations remain light and buoyant rather than forceful, while small pauses, unexpected accents, and delicate harmonic turns give the music the expressive gestures of a miniature theatrical performance.

As the rag passes through its contrasting strains, its personality continually shifts. Brighter passages suggest the clown's outward charm and agility, while more reflective episodes reveal something tender beneath the surface. The later sections move into a warmer harmonic landscape, allowing the melody to broaden and sing more openly before the piece concludes with characteristic poise.

Although firmly connected to classic ragtime, *The Ragtime Pierrot* already reveals qualities that distinguish Ashwander's mature work: memorable melody, rhythmic flexibility, imaginative bass writing, and an ability to suggest an entire scene or character through music.

TRACK 03

Winter Fields

1966

Winter Fields reveals a quieter and more contemplative side of Ashwander's early musical voice. Written alongside several of his most energetic rags, the piece moves beyond the conventional boundaries of ragtime and toward the lyricism of American folk music, hymnody, and the remembered landscapes of his Southern childhood.

The opening melody unfolds with unhurried simplicity, supported by a gently rocking accompaniment that gives the music a feeling of steady movement across a broad, still landscape. Open intervals and restrained harmonies suggest fields emptied by the season - beautiful, exposed, and touched by loneliness. Nothing is overstated; the expressive power comes from repetition, subtle changes of harmony, and the quiet persistence of the melodic line.

As the piece develops, the texture becomes fuller and the emotional temperature gradually rises. Brief surges of rhythmic energy disturb the stillness, yet even at its most animated the music retains a sense of inwardness. The melody repeatedly emerges from and recedes into the accompaniment, as though memory itself were briefly coming into focus and then withdrawing.

Rudi Blesh described Ashwander as an intuitive composer who drew deeply upon memory and the unconscious. Winter Fields embodies that quality especially well: less a literal depiction of winter than an emotional landscape - a meditation on solitude, distance, and the austere beauty of familiar places transformed by time and season.

TRACK 04

Voices, Voices

1966

Voices, Voices is among the most introspective and harmonically adventurous works of Ashwander's early period. Syncopation remains essential to its language, but this is not an extroverted rag. Instead, the music unfolds like an inward conversation, with melodic fragments seeming to call to one another, overlap, recede, and return in altered form.

The opening has a gentle, searching quality. A clear melodic line emerges above a restrained accompaniment, but the music rarely settles into emotional certainty. Warm harmonies give way to darker and more unsettled passages, creating the impression that several moods – or several memories – are competing to be heard. Phrases often seem to answer themselves, as though one musical voice were questioning or completing the thought of another.

As the piece develops, the texture grows fuller and the rhythmic motion more insistent. The various melodic strands gather into a broad emotional arc, reaching moments of considerable intensity without losing the music's underlying restraint. The energy then subsides, returning to a quieter and more solitary atmosphere.

No surviving explanation of the title has been located, and Ashwander wisely leaves the meaning open. The 'voices' might suggest remembered conversations, interior voices, or distant echoes. What matters is the way they are conveyed entirely through melody, harmony, and changing layers of sound, transforming syncopated language into something intimate and psychologically rich.

TRACK 05

Upstairs Rag

1966

Upstairs Rag begins in an unexpectedly restrained manner. Rather than announcing itself with the bright, emphatic energy of a conventional rag, it opens with a thoughtful, minor-tinged melody and an accompaniment that moves with quiet deliberation. The syncopation is subtle, woven naturally into the melodic line, while the harmonies create an atmosphere at once intimate and slightly mysterious.

As the rag unfolds, its personality gradually becomes more animated. Melodic lines rise through the keyboard, the texture grows fuller, and the music begins to suggest the physical act of climbing - whether a staircase, the floors of a city building, or simply an ascent from inward reflection toward greater activity. Ashwander repeatedly avoids predictable resolutions, allowing an unexpected bass note, harmonic sidestep, or displaced accent to send the music in a new direction.

The most striking transformation arrives later, when the music acquires a more urgent, almost breathless momentum. The keyboard brightens, rhythmic figures become more compact, and the previously measured walk turns into a lively upward rush. Yet even here Ashwander resists empty display; the rapid writing remains melodic and carefully shaped.

Upstairs Rag is a vivid example of Ashwander's ability to work within the ragtime tradition without being confined by it. Familiar gestures are present throughout, but they are transformed by unusual pacing, fluid structure, expressive harmony, and an instinct for musical storytelling.

TRACK 06

Harlem River Houseboat Rag

1966

Harlem River Houseboat Rag is one of the most atmospheric pieces from Ashwander's first great burst of ragtime writing. Its title conjures a waterside New York removed from the city's usual rush: an intimate, slightly eccentric world where urban life meets the rhythm of the river. No surviving statement has been found confirming a literal program, but the image is a fitting doorway into the music.

The rag opens with a relaxed, slightly mysterious strain whose minor-colored harmonies seem to drift rather than march forward. Beneath the melody, the left hand maintains a supple rocking motion. Ashwander avoids the mechanical regularity sometimes associated with ragtime accompaniment; the bass continually shifts its shape and direction, giving the music an unusually fluid quality.

As the piece unfolds, darker and more reflective passages alternate with brighter, more animated episodes. The melodies are highly syncopated but never harsh, moving with conversational ease. Unexpected harmonic turns briefly cloud the atmosphere before the music regains its balance, while changes of register and texture create the sensation of changing views along the water.

The later strains become more expansive and confident, yet the music retains its underlying sway. Harlem River Houseboat Rag demonstrates Ashwander's gift for transforming a traditional form into a vivid musical environment - a portrait of New York viewed from its margins, poised between the movement of the city and the quieter rhythm of the river.

TRACK 07

Gayola Rag

1966

Gayola Rag is one of the most rhythmically buoyant and harmonically colorful works from Ashwander's extraordinarily productive early period. The piece begins with an immediately engaging, good-humored quality: its melody skips easily across the underlying pulse, propelled by syncopations that feel playful rather than aggressive.

As in so much of Ashwander's music, the left hand does considerably more than supply a conventional ragtime accompaniment. Bass figures shift shape, register, and emphasis, giving the music elasticity and forward motion. The result is unmistakably ragtime, but never rigidly confined by the formulas of an earlier generation.

What becomes especially striking as the piece develops is its expanding harmonic range. The opening music is relatively bright and settled, but later strains move into increasingly unexpected tonal territory. Major and minor colors intermingle, the texture becomes fuller, and the music gradually acquires greater weight and intensity. By the final portion of the rag, the restrained charm of the opening has grown into something much more exuberant, with stronger rhythmic momentum and a broad, ringing sonority.

No documented explanation of the unusual title has been located, and its precise meaning should remain open. Musically, however, Gayola Rag is unmistakably Ashwander: witty, melodically spontaneous, rhythmically restless, and increasingly adventurous as it unfolds.

TRACK 08

Mobile Carnival Rag-Tango

1966

Mobile Carnival Rag-Tango is one of Ashwander's most colorful early experiments with the ragtime form, combining the syncopated language of ragtime with the more deliberate pulse and darker sensuality of the tango. The title also returns him to Mobile, Alabama, a city central to his life and musical imagination.

Ashwander later explained that he began the piece intending to capture nothing more than the frantic gaiety of Mardi Gras. To his surprise, the music soon began to turn dark. Rather than force it back toward his original plan, he followed the unexpected direction it had taken, allowing the composition to arrive in what he called a completely unpremeditated place. That creative turn is one of the work's most compelling features.

The opening has a measured, almost processional swagger. Ragtime syncopations continually rub against tango-like accents, creating a push and pull between buoyancy and weight. As the piece develops, minor-key shadows alternate with brighter passages, and the harmony takes on an increasingly vivid, at times almost cinematic color. Some sections suggest the elegance of a ballroom; others carry the restless energy of a street procession.

Mobile Carnival Rag-Tango is an excellent example of Ashwander's refusal to treat ragtime as a fixed historical style. He uses it as a point of departure, absorbing another dance tradition and then following the music beyond even his own expectations. The result is festive, theatrical, and unexpectedly shadowed - a Carnival piece whose darkness becomes part of its fascination.

TRACK 09

Late Hours Rag

1966

Late Hours Rag is a wonderfully atmospheric example of Ashwander's ability to bring an introspective, almost nocturnal mood into the language of ragtime. Rather than relying on exuberance or virtuoso display, the piece unfolds with measured, unhurried confidence, suggesting the quieter world that emerges after the activity of the day has subsided.

The opening has an easy, slightly detached elegance. A gently syncopated melody moves above the familiar ragtime pulse, but Ashwander continually softens the music's rhythmic edges with lyrical phrasing and unexpected harmonic turns. The tonal landscape frequently shifts between warmth and darker color, giving the music a subtle emotional ambiguity: brightness is present, but repeatedly touched by shadow.

That contrast becomes one of the piece's most compelling qualities. Some passages become more animated and rhythmically assertive, while others retreat into a reflective mood. Ashwander's bass writing remains supple throughout, providing the steady foundation expected of ragtime while avoiding mechanical repetition. The accompaniment seems to breathe with the melody, sometimes urging it forward and sometimes allowing it to linger.

No surviving explanation of the title has been located, but it feels perfectly suited to the music's mixture of activity and introspection. Late Hours Rag has the intimacy of a late-night conversation - relaxed, sophisticated, occasionally wistful, and unmistakably Ashwander.

TRACK 10

Sea Oats

1966

Sea Oats is one of Ashwander's most graceful and atmospheric early pieces. Its title evokes the tall grasses that line Gulf Coast dunes - a landscape he would have known from his Alabama years - and the music seems to capture something of their movement and spaciousness: wind, gentle bending, and the changing play of light across an open shore.

The opening is unusually lyrical. Set within a moderate ragtime pulse, the melody rises and falls in long, supple phrases while the left hand maintains a steady but flexible foundation. The syncopation feels almost effortless, woven into the melodic line rather than placed conspicuously against the beat. There is a wonderful sense of sway throughout the music.

Ashwander also makes subtle use of harmonic color. A predominantly warm atmosphere is repeatedly shaded by more introspective harmonies, allowing the music to move easily between brightness and wistfulness. These changes pass across the piece almost like shadows moving over a landscape. As successive strains unfold, the melody becomes increasingly expansive, while the bass gives the music quiet propulsion beneath its relaxed surface.

The later section brings a beautiful change of perspective, opening into a broader, more luminous tonal area. Sea Oats has little of the bustling urban energy associated with many rags; its pleasures are subtler - melodic grace, gently shifting harmony, rhythmic buoyancy, and an underlying feeling of calm. Whether or not Ashwander intended a literal landscape, the piece feels warm, windswept, and quietly nostalgic.

TRACK II

Business in Town

1966

Business in Town is one of Ashwander's most personal and vividly autobiographical rags. Its inspiration reaches back to the Great Depression, when Ashwander and his brother Dan spent time with their grandparents on a farm several miles outside Bessemer, Alabama. For a child whose imagination thrived on cities and movies, farm life could feel confining. One announcement from his grandfather therefore promised adventure: there was 'business in town,' and the children could come along.

Getting there meant traveling by horse and wagon. Ashwander remembered that his grandfather always called his horse Maud, regardless of which horse happened to bear the name. The boys climbed into the wagon bed and settled onto worn patchwork quilts meant to soften the terrible country roads. Potholes, ruts, rocks, and jolts were part of the journey, yet nothing could diminish the excitement of going to town. Ashwander later said directly that Business in Town grew from those memories.

That story is almost immediately audible in the music. The rag moves at a brisk, buoyant pace, but its rhythmic progress is anything but smooth. Syncopated accents, sudden emphases, and shifting patterns create the sensation of forward motion repeatedly interrupted by bumps in the road. The steady pulse becomes a musical equivalent of the horse and wagon itself: persistent, good-natured, and forever bouncing along.

Above that foundation, the melodies are filled with eagerness and high spirits. The music seems animated by a child's anticipation - the knowledge that the ordinary landscape of the farm is being left behind and that somewhere ahead lies the excitement of town. Along with Friday Night, Business in Town later appeared in *They All Played Ragtime*, giving Ashwander's new music an important place in the ragtime revival. It remains a finely crafted rag and a miniature piece of musical autobiography.

TRACK 12

Astor Place Rag Waltz

1966

Astor Place Rag Waltz is one of Ashwander's most evocative early works, a graceful fusion of ragtime syncopation and the flowing triple meter of the waltz. Beneath its elegance lies a strong sense of memory, appropriate for a piece inspired by a part of New York that Ashwander felt was inhabited by the past.

Ashwander wrote that Astor Place 'harbors ghosts.' He was fascinated by the area's historical associations, but his connection to the neighborhood was also deeply personal. His close friend Rudi Blesh lived nearby, and the two would spend evenings listening to Blesh's collection of old 78-rpm records, hearing stories of the 1920s, and drinking Stingers - a cocktail Blesh considered emblematic of that era. Their supplies came from the Astor Place Liquor Store. Because the rag-waltz became one of Blesh's favorites, Ashwander dedicated it to him.

That mingling of past and present can be heard throughout the music. The opening has a poised, almost old-fashioned grace, with a lilting waltz accompaniment supporting a melody whose syncopations continually tug against the three-beat pulse. Rather than disrupting the dance, the ragtime inflections give it elasticity: phrases seem to lean forward, hesitate, and then recover their balance.

The mood is not uniformly nostalgic. Darker harmonic colors repeatedly intrude upon the warmth of the waltz, giving apparently carefree melodies a reflective cast. Ragtime and waltz remain in constant conversation - the circular motion of one interacting with the displaced accents of the other. The result feels like a musical remembrance of old New York and, more personally, of evenings spent with a treasured friend.

TRACK 13

Peacock Colors

1967

Peacock Colors is one of Ashwander's most imaginative early works, a piece he ultimately described as an 'Iridescent Rag-Waltz.' Its origin is unusually well documented in the composer's own recollection. On a rainy morning in June 1967, Ashwander found himself with an entirely unscheduled day and decided to write what he hoped would be a new kind of rag.

His first idea was a Blues Rag-Waltz - something dark and predominantly blue in character. But as he composed, the music refused to stay within that palette. Purples, browns, greens, and colors in between began finding their way into the harmony. Looking up from the piano after the piece was finished, Ashwander noticed an Art Nouveau vase filled with peacock feathers. The title suddenly became obvious.

The music beautifully justifies that image. A gently swaying waltz pulse supports syncopations that continually pull against the three-beat meter. The melody has a fluid quality, while the harmony shifts with unusual freedom beneath it. Major and minor colors intermingle; chromatic turns briefly darken a phrase before giving way to something warmer or more luminous. Some passages retain the melancholy Ashwander initially intended, while others become playful, elegant, mysterious, or unexpectedly radiant.

Its expansive length gives these colors room to develop gradually. Ideas return subtly transformed, melodic lines move into new registers, and the texture alternately contracts and blossoms. Peacock Colors captures something fundamental about Ashwander's approach to composition: he could begin with a familiar form and then follow the music wherever it wanted to go. The beauty lies precisely in its ability to change color as it moves.

TRACK 14

Okra Rag

1967

Okra Rag is a compact, wonderfully characterful example of Ashwander's ability to combine the formal discipline of ragtime with humor, rhythmic elasticity, and a distinctly Southern flavor. The title points toward the everyday vernacular world that so often fed his imagination, although no surviving statement has been located explaining why he chose this particular name.

Musically, the piece has a springy, mischievous quality. The opening is colored strongly by minor harmony, giving the melody a slightly sly character rather than the sunny exuberance of a conventional rag. Against the regular left-hand pulse, Ashwander places crisp syncopated figures that seem continually to hesitate, dart forward, and change direction. The phrasing has a pleasing irregularity: carefully constructed, yet never stiff.

As the piece unfolds, darker passages are balanced by brighter harmonic turns, and the melody shifts between short, sharply defined gestures and more flowing lines. The bass contributes greatly to the effect. Rather than repeating an unchanging 'oom-pah' accompaniment, the left hand participates in the conversation, altering register and shape and giving the music buoyant physical motion.

There is something deliberately down-to-earth about Okra Rag. Its humor is understated, its melodies memorable without being sentimental, and its rhythmic energy has the easy naturalness that Blesh admired in Ashwander's writing. The result is unpretentious, earthy, slightly quirky, and full of personality.

TRACK 15

Perdido Bay Moon Rag

1967 · first version

Perdido Bay Moon Rag began with a title suggested by Ashwander's longtime friend Edith Zelnicker. During a summer visit with Edith and her husband Edwin at Bear Point, Alabama, on Perdido Bay, the friends reminisced about childhood days spent beneath magnolia trees and Spanish moss, exploring the landscape along the Gulf Coast. Edith suggested that Ashwander write a piece called Perdido Bay Moon Rag. He liked the title immediately and promised that he would.

Back in New York, Ashwander fulfilled that promise by composing the version heard on this album. It is ambitious and unusually expansive, filled with shifting textures, intricate syncopations, and demanding keyboard writing. When he sent the score to Edith, however, she found the piece too difficult to play. On later visits, Ashwander would see the manuscript still displayed prominently on the Zelnickers' piano, and Edith would tell him that she had tried to play it but could never quite manage its technical demands.

That detail became increasingly important. Although Ashwander had written the piece for Edith, in a sense he had written a piece she could not fully enjoy at the piano herself. Heard today, this first version offers a fascinating glimpse into his imagination at full stretch. The opening has a relaxed, lyrical character, but the music soon expands into increasingly elaborate territory. Melodic ideas flow one into another, harmonies wander through unexpected regions, and the left hand frequently moves beyond the steady patterns associated with traditional ragtime. The result is colorful and inventive, but noticeably more complex than many of Ashwander's other early rags.

Years later, after Edith's death, Ashwander returned to the idea and decided to begin again. Rather than simplifying or revising the 1967 composition, he wrote an entirely new Perdido Bay Moon Rag in 1988, dedicated to Edith's memory. Ashwander recalled that the second piece seemed almost to write itself. This original version therefore occupies a special place in his catalog: an imaginative first attempt to fulfill a promise to a close friend, and the beginning of a musical story that would not reach its final form for more than two decades.

TRACK 16

Alabama Backroads

1967

Alabama Backroads is one of Ashwander's most direct musical evocations of the rural South that shaped his childhood. Born in Birmingham and raised for a time on a farm near Hanceville, he carried the sounds, landscapes, and habits of Alabama with him long after settling in New York. In this piece, that background seems to surface not as picturesque nostalgia, but as something lived and remembered.

The music begins with a minor-tinged, slightly restless character. Its syncopated melody moves above a steady but flexible bass, creating an immediate sensation of travel without suggesting anything particularly smooth or grand. There is a wonderfully uneven gait – small rhythmic jolts, changing accents, and melodic turns that seem almost to negotiate the contours of an unpaved road. Like *Business in Town*, the physical sensation of movement appears embedded in the rhythm itself, though here the mood is more reflective.

As the piece progresses, its harmonic landscape gradually brightens. Darker opening colors give way to warmer passages, and the melody becomes increasingly open and buoyant. Yet Ashwander never allows the music to settle into uncomplicated cheerfulness. Major and minor continually brush against one another, creating the mixture of affection and distance that appears so often in his music of memory.

No surviving statement identifies a particular road or journey, so Alabama Backroads is best heard as an emotional rather than literal map. Its shifting harmonies, gently irregular motion, and plainspoken melodies suggest not simply a drive through the countryside, but the more elusive experience of returning in memory to a landscape that helped shape the composer.

TRACK 17

Second Floor Front

1967

Second Floor Front closes this first volume with a piece that feels distinctly urban - compact, animated, slightly eccentric, and filled with the rhythmic personality that had emerged so rapidly since Friday Night. The title has the clipped practical flavor of old apartment-house terminology, suggesting a front-facing room on an upper floor. No surviving statement from Ashwander has been located explaining whether a specific apartment, person, or incident stood behind it.

The music begins with alert, almost conversational energy. The melody moves in short, sharply profiled gestures over a brisk ragtime pulse, with syncopations that continually shift the listener's sense of balance. There is something lightly theatrical about the opening, as though we have entered a small room already alive with activity. The left hand supplies momentum without becoming mechanical, while the treble darts between clipped figures and more expansive phrases.

The piece is particularly effective in the way it alternates brightness with darker harmonic shading. Cheerful passages can suddenly take an unexpected turn, and seemingly straightforward phrases acquire a questioning or ironic edge. As the rag develops, changes of register and texture increase the sense of activity, yet the composition remains concise: ideas arrive, make their point, and move on.

One can easily imagine a lighted window above the street, music drifting from an apartment, or a private life taking place just beyond a city façade. That image is speculative, but it suits the intimacy of the piece and anticipates the New York subjects that would increasingly occupy Ashwander in later years. Second Floor Front is a fitting close to Volume I: witty, economical, rhythmically alive, and already pointing toward the broader urban world of his mature music.

THE PIANIST

About Corte Swearingen

Corte Swearingen is a pianist devoted to American piano music, with a particular focus on composers and works outside the standard classical canon. His playing emphasizes clarity, lyricism, and respect for each composer's individual voice.

He is the founder of American Piano Music, a project dedicated to preserving and promoting overlooked and under-documented piano repertoire. Through recordings, writing, and research, Swearingen works directly with original scores and manuscripts to bring this music into the present.

His work on the music of Donald Ashwander reflects a long-standing commitment to uncovering and sharing deserving American piano voices.

FREE RESOURCES

American Piano Music on YouTube

www.youtube.com/c/AmericanPianoMusic

American Piano Music website

www.americanpianomusic.com

Selected Sources & Research Notes

The track essays combine musical commentary with documented recollections preserved in Ashwander family materials and historical liner notes. Interpretive descriptions of mood and imagery are presented as musical readings rather than as claims of specific programmatic intent.

New World Records. Donald Ashwander: Sunshine and Shadow (80724-2), 2012. Liner notes by Max Morath, incorporating Donald Ashwander's own recollections and earlier commentary by Rudi Blesh.

Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis. They All Played Ragtime. A foundational history of ragtime that played a central role in Ashwander's musical life and in the revival of the form.

American Piano Music. Donald Ashwander Volume I: chronology, album background, and project documentation.

The Ashwander Family. Family history and manuscript information shared by Sharon Moore, Judy Ashwander-Moore, and Eva Lynn Odom.

Performance commentary. Descriptions of musical character, texture, harmony, and rhythmic profile are based on close listening to the performances on this recording and study of the surviving scores and project materials.

Donald Ashwander: The Complete Works for Solo Piano, Volume I

Corte Swearingen, piano