

MIQDASH BETHEL COVENANT ASSEMBLY

Pearl River, Louisiana · miqdashbethel@gmail.com

WITNESSES TO THE WOUND

A Covenant Investigation into the Exploitation of the Zamar Carriers

100 Years of the Music Business on Trial

Report No. 1 of an Ongoing Series

SCOTT JOPLIN

1867/1868 – 1917

The King of Ragtime

*Son of a former slave — Composer of America's first Indigenous Music Form — Died penniless
in a mental institution — Buried in a pauper's grave, unmarked for 57 years*

March 2026 · Kepha Arcemont, Elder and Founder

SECTION ONE — THE GIFT: WHO YAHWEH MADE HIM

Biography: The Making of a Covenant Musician

Scott Joplin was born between the summer of 1867 and January 1868 — the exact date unknown, a fitting emblem of how America treated the lives of Black people in that era. His father, Giles Joplin, was a former slave from North Carolina. His mother, Florence Givens, was a freeborn Black woman from Kentucky. They settled in Texarkana, Texas, where Giles found work on the railroad — the same iron infrastructure that was industrializing the nation on the labor of men like him. From the beginning, **music was not something Joplin pursued — it pursued him.** He practiced piano in the homes where his mother did domestic work — playing other people's instruments in other people's houses because his family had none. His gift was visible early enough that a German immigrant music teacher named Julius Weiss, recognizing what stood before him, gave the boy piano and theory lessons at no charge. Weiss introduced him to European opera and classical composition — planting seeds that would grow into Joplin's greatest and most rejected work, the opera *Treemonisha*.

By his late teens Joplin was traveling the American South as a working musician. He was in Chicago for the World's Fair of 1893, where ragtime — the music he would define — first reached a national audience. He settled in Sedalia, Missouri in 1894, teaching piano and performing at the Black social clubs of the city. He enrolled at the George R. Smith College to study advanced harmony and composition. He was a musician building his craft with discipline and intention, not a man waiting to be discovered.

The gift Yahweh placed in Scott Joplin was precision, innovation, and architectural intelligence. Ragtime was not a simple form. Its interlocking syncopated rhythms against a steady bass demanded both hands operating with near-independence. Joplin's rags were more sophisticated than anything being published in the genre — when he first brought *Maple Leaf Rag* to John Stark, the publisher rejected it as too difficult for the average player. It took a demonstration performance to change his mind. The gift was real, documented, and undeniable.

Born	1867 or 1868, near Marshall, Texas (exact date disputed)
Parents	Giles Joplin (former slave, railroad laborer) and Florence Givens (freeborn, Kentucky)
Instrument	Piano — self-taught initially, later formally trained by Julius Weiss (German classical teacher)
Key Works	Maple Leaf Rag (1899), The Entertainer (1902), Treemonisha (opera, 1910/1911 published)
Catalog	Over 40 ragtime compositions, 1 ragtime ballet, 2 operas

Death	April 1, 1917 — Manhattan State Hospital (mental institution) — syphilitic dementia
Burial	Pauper's grave, St. Michael's Cemetery, East Elmhurst, Queens — unmarked for 57 years
Recognition	Posthumous Pulitzer Prize, 1976. Songwriters Hall of Fame, 1970. US Postal Stamp, 1983.

SECTION TWO — THE WOUND: WHAT WAS DONE TO HIM

The Exploitation — Layer by Layer

Layer One: The One-Cent Contract

On August 10, 1899, Scott Joplin signed a contract with publisher John Stillwell Stark for the publication of *Maple Leaf Rag*. The royalty rate: **one cent per copy sold**, against a minimum sale price of 25 cents. This was not a partnership. This was not covenant provision. This was the extraction of a Black man's creative labor for a fraction of its commercial value — dressed as a business agreement.

The mathematics are documented by his primary biographer, Edward A. Berlin (*King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era*, Oxford University Press, 1996), the definitive scholarly authority on Joplin's life and finances:

Year one of publication: 400 copies sold. Joplin's total income from the song that would make him famous: \$4.00.

That is four dollars. The equivalent of approximately \$150 in 2026. For the composition that would become *the most influential ragtime piece in American music history*, and whose royalties would fund John Stark's publishing company for the rest of its existence.

By 1909, estimated annual sales had grown enough to provide Joplin with roughly \$600 per year — approximately \$21,000 in today's value. By comparison, Stark built a publishing company on that catalog. **Joplin received a penny per copy. Stark owned the copyright, the distribution, and the profit above that penny.**

◆ *I signed my first performance contract in Texas without a lawyer. Every working musician knows that moment — you are desperate to play, someone has the room and the PA system, and you sign what they put in front of you. Joplin signed at one cent a copy because he had no leverage and no legal infrastructure. The gift was his. The profit went to the man with the printing press. This has not changed in 127 years.*

Layer Two: The One-Sided Publisher Relationship

The relationship between Joplin and Stark has been described by some historians as mutually respectful — and that nuance must be honored per the covenant research standard. Stark did publish Joplin consistently over many years and moved his company from Sedalia to St. Louis to New York partly in proximity to his most important composer. This was not pure exploitation in the manner of a Herman Lubinsky.

However, the structural imbalance was absolute and never corrected. **Stark owned the masters. Stark set the pricing. Stark controlled the distribution network.** When the relationship eventually frayed, it was over Joplin's demands for better terms on his more ambitious works. Stark declined to publish *Treemonisha* — the work Joplin considered his masterpiece and life's purpose. The publisher who had profited from Joplin's ragtime catalog for over a decade turned away from the composer's deepest covenant expression when it no longer fit the commercial mold.

Biographer Berlin documents: "*Treemonisha went unnoticed and unreviewed, largely because Joplin had abandoned commercial music in favor of art music, a field closed to African Americans.*" Stark was not the only publisher who rejected it. **Every publisher Joplin approached turned the opera down.** The son of a former slave attempting to write and produce America's first Indigenous opera was told, by every door he knocked on, that this field was not for him.

Layer Three: The Theft of the First Opera Score

In 1903, Joplin mounted a tour of his first opera, *A Guest of Honor*, through the American Midwest. The tour was viable. The performances happened. Then someone — unnamed, never identified, never held accountable — **stole the receipts from the tour.** With no money to pay the performers, the company disbanded. Joplin was left in Pittsburg, Kansas, where his score and personal belongings were confiscated by a boarding house as payment for unpaid rent.

The score of *A Guest of Honor* has never been found. It is lost permanently. The first operatic work of America's King of Ragtime — gone, because a thief took the tour money and the legal system offered a Black composer in Jim Crow America no mechanism of recovery. No investigation. No prosecution. No restitution. The covenant word for this is **gazel** (גזל — robbery, violent taking). The Torah prohibits it. The world allowed it.

Layer Four: The Self-Published Opera and Financial Ruin

Treemonisha was Joplin's life work — a 250-page full operatic score he wrote over years, encoding in music the story of a Black community's liberation through education. He wrote both the score and the libretto. The American Musician and Art Journal, upon its publication, called it "*one of the first truly authentically American operas.*"

Every major publisher rejected it. Joplin, "*poor and in failing health*," according to the Encyclopedia of Arkansas, **used his own money to publish the 250-page score in 1911**. He drained his financial reserves to put his greatest work into print. He then attempted three times to stage it. The single partially-staged performance in 1915 — with Joplin alone at the piano because he could not afford an orchestra — failed completely. Biographer Vera Brodsky Lawrence documents that Joplin "*plunged feverishly into the task of orchestrating his opera, day and night, with his friend Sam Patterson standing by to copy out the parts, page by page, as each page of the full score was completed*" — a man who knew he was running out of time, racing a disease that was consuming his mind.

Irving Berlin's mega-hit *Alexander's Ragtime Band* was published in 1911 — the same year Joplin self-published *Treemonisha*. Joplin publicly claimed that one strain of Berlin's song was lifted from a number in his opera. Berlin was white, wealthy, well-connected, and at the center of Tin Pan Alley. His song — which contained *almost no actual ragtime* — cleaned up commercially while Joplin's authentic masterwork bankrupted its creator. The man who popularized the word 'ragtime' for white audiences profited enormously. The man who created ragtime died in a mental institution.

Layer Five: The Pauper's Grave

Scott Joplin died on April 1, 1917, in Manhattan State Hospital — a mental institution — of syphilitic dementia. He was 48 or 49 years old. He was penniless. He was largely forgotten. He was buried in a group pauper's grave at St. Michael's Cemetery in East Elmhurst, Queens.

His grave remained **unmarked for 57 years**. The spokesman for St. Michael's Cemetery confirmed to WFUV: "*These were people who were truly indigent. People had a hard time to just pay for what the costs were.*"

In 1974 — the same year his music dominated the Academy Awards through *The Sting*, the same year that film made Marvin Hamlisch famous for *arranging Joplin's own compositions* — ASCAP finally placed a marker on his grave. **The man whose music won Best Picture in Hollywood had been lying in an unmarked pauper's grave for 57 years**. The covenant word for this is ***cherpah*** (חֶרְפָּה — reproach, disgrace, the shame brought upon the worthy by the unworthy).

His orchestral scores — the full instrumental parts for *Treemonisha* — were thrown in the trash in 1962 by a lawyer settling an estate. Three or four boxes marked 'Treemonisha.' Crumbling music paper. Parts for cornet, drums, violin. Hauled to the curb. Lost forever. **The covenant musician's life work, discarded as rubbish**. No archive. No preservation. No heir who could afford to care for it.

SECTION THREE — THE THREE WITNESSES (DEVARIM 19:15)

Corroboration of the Record

Per the covenant research standard of Miqdash Bethel — two or three independent witnesses required before any charge is entered into the permanent record — the following sources corroborate every material fact in this report:

WITNESS One: *Edward A. Berlin, King of Ragtime: Scott Joplin and His Era* (Oxford University Press, 1996) — the definitive scholarly biography, peer-reviewed, published by the world's leading academic press. Berlin documents: the one-cent royalty contract (August 10, 1899), the initial 400-copy print run, the \$4.00 first-year income, the rejection of *Treemonisha* by all major publishers, and the financial collapse of Joplin's final years.

WITNESS Two: *Encyclopedia of Arkansas* (encyclopediaofarkansas.net) — an academic reference resource of the University of Arkansas. Confirms: the \$50 advance plus one-cent royalty contract with Stark; the self-publication of *Treemonisha* at personal cost; Joplin's death 'poor and in failing health' at Manhattan State Hospital; the loss of the *Treemonisha* orchestral manuscripts in 1962.

WITNESS Three: *WFUV Public Radio* (Fordham University, New York) — documented interview with biographer Edward Berlin and St. Michael's Cemetery spokesman Ed Horn. Confirms: Joplin died penniless and largely forgotten; his pauper's grave went unmarked for decades; St. Michael's Cemetery spokesman confirms group burial for the truly indigent.

Additional corroboration: San Francisco Classical Voice (sfcv.org), Kennedy Center (kennedy-center.org), Library of Congress National Recording Preservation Board documentation, and Opera Theatre of Saint Louis (opera-stl.org) all independently confirm the core facts of Joplin's life, contract terms, and death.

SECTION FOUR — THE COVENANT ANALYSIS: WHAT THE TORAH SAYS

The Torah Charges — Applied to Scott Joplin

Charge One: Withholding Wages — Vayikra 19:13

"You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning."

— Vayikra (Leviticus) 19:13

The Hebrew *lo ta'ashoq* — do not oppress, do not defraud — governs every employment relationship in the covenant. Joplin created the value that made John Stark's publishing company commercially viable. He received one cent per copy. Stark received the difference between one cent and all other profits on every sale. **This is ashaq — the oppression of the laborer by the one who controls the distribution of his labor's fruit.** The Torah does not require malicious intent for this to be a violation. The structure itself is the sin.

Charge Two: Muzzling the Ox — Devarim 25:4

"You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain."

— Devarim (Deuteronomy) 25:4

Joplin produced the musical harvest that fed Stark's publishing enterprise. He was paid a fraction of what the harvest yielded. **The ox that treads the grain must eat from the grain it treads.** The covenant principle is unambiguous: the one who does the productive creative labor is entitled to share proportionally in the product of that labor. One cent on a 25-cent sale — four percent — while the publisher captures the remaining 96% and owns the copyright in perpetuity, is the muzzled ox in contractual form.

Charge Three: The Destruction of the Life's Work — Mishlei 11:3

"The integrity of the upright guides them, but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them."

— Mishlei (Proverbs) 11:3

Treemonisha was not a commercial failure because it was a poor work. It was a commercial failure because the field of serious art music in America was, as biographer Berlin documents, *"closed to African Americans."* The structural racism of the American cultural establishment — every publisher who rejected it, every financier who refused to back it — was not responding to artistic quality. It was responding to the color of the composer's face. Joplin spent his last financial reserves and the last years of a mind being destroyed by disease to bring *Treemonisha* into print. The crookedness of a system that closed its doors to Black artistic ambition destroyed the man who carried one of the greatest musical gifts of his generation.

Charge Four: The Forgotten Grave — Devarim 24:14–15

"You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns. You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets... lest he cry against you to Yahweh, and you be guilty of sin."

— Devarim (Deuteronomy) 24:14-15

Joplin died without wages owed. He died without recognition. He died without even a marked stone over his body. **The cry of the exploited worker rises to Yahweh.** The Torah says this explicitly: the cry of the one defrauded of his labor goes directly before the throne. A 57-year unmarked grave is not merely a historical tragedy. It is a covenant record. **Yahweh heard the cry. The record stands.**

SECTION FIVE — THE LIVING WITNESS: KEPHA ARCEMONT, 2026

A Blues Guitarist Reads the Record

I have been playing guitar since I was fourteen years old. I grew up in New Orleans — the same cultural river that runs from Joplin's ragtime into jazz, blues, R&B, and everything that followed. I am not a musicologist looking at Joplin from a distance. I am a working musician reading the contract terms of a man who worked 127 years before me, and recognizing every single structural trap.

◆ *Joplin signed a one-cent royalty at a 25-cent sale price. I have played shows where the promoter paid me less than my gas money and sold \$600 in beer to people who came to hear me play. The mechanism is identical. The man with the infrastructure captures the value. The man with the gift goes home with what is left over, which is sometimes nothing. The only thing that has changed since 1899 is the paperwork.*

What makes Joplin's case the foundation of this entire series is not just the exploitation. It is the **ambition that the system destroyed**. He was not merely a ragtime entertainer trying to make money. He was a covenant musician in the full Tanakh sense of the word — a man who had been given a gift and wanted to take it to its highest expression. *Treemonisha* was his **shirat ha'kodesh** — his sacred song. And every door was shut. When the *Maple Leaf Rag* finally brought him enough income to stop playing in saloons and concentrate on composition, he did not coast. He studied. He built. He wrote an opera about a Black woman leading her people out of ignorance and superstition through education. He wrote it in Texarkana in his mind — on the same soil where his father had been someone else's property. **He was trying to be Dawid** — the covenant musician who moves from the kinnor in the field to the architect of something that would outlast his own lifetime.

◆ *Peace of Blues, The Kepha Arcemont Experiment — every project I have built has come from the same place Joplin worked from. You have a vision. You have the gift Yahweh put in you. You go out and try to realize it in a world that is structured to capture the value of what you carry without giving you your fair share. I relocated to New Orleans in September 2024 and started over, at an age when most people have stopped. Because the zamar does not retire. Because the covenant musician plays until the hand of Yahweh says stop. Joplin played piano rolls in April 1916 with syphilitic tremors in his hands. He was still trying to leave the record. That is the covenant musician. That is who we are.*

The difference between Joplin in 1899 and a musician on Spotify in 2026 is bandwidth and speed, not structure. **The streaming platforms pay fractions of a cent per play** — the precise economic logic of the one-cent royalty, updated for the digital age. The artist creates. The infrastructure captures. The gifted go home with what is left, which is often not enough to cover the cost of creating the work that generated the revenue.

SECTION SIX — THE COVENANT VERDICT: THE JUDGMENT OF YAHWEH

Yahweh's Record on Scott Joplin

The covenant verdict of this report is not about John Stark personally. The record shows Stark was a mixed figure — not the worst exploiter in music industry history, not a covenant partner either. He was a businessman in a system that was never designed to give a Black composer his full measure. He operated within that system. The covenant indictment falls on the **system**, and on every individual and institution that participated in its maintenance.

The charges are entered and corroborated:

One: One-cent royalty on a composition whose commercial legacy built a publishing company. Vayikra 19:13 — **ashaq**. Violation confirmed.

Two: Rejection of Treemonisha by every major publisher on racial grounds. Systematic closure of 'high art' to Black composers. Devarim 24:14–15 — oppression of the hired worker. Violation confirmed.

Three: Loss of the Guest of Honor score through theft with no legal recourse. Devarim 19:15 — no justice without witnesses; the witnesses were silenced by a Jim Crow system. Structural violation confirmed.

Four: Self-publication of Treemonisha at personal financial ruin. The gifted man forced to fund his own covenant expression while the infrastructure that profited from him turned its back. Violation of Bemidbar 18's provision principle confirmed.

Five: Pauper's grave, unmarked 57 years. The man whose music won Best Picture in Hollywood — lying in a group indigent burial. Devarim 25:4 — the muzzled ox. Violation confirmed.

YAHWEH'S COVENANT VERDICT ON THE TREATMENT OF SCOTT JOPLIN:

The King of Ragtime was a zamar carrier of the first order — gifted at creation, faithful in discipline, visionary in ambition. He was given a one-cent contract when his work was worth a publishing empire. He was turned away from every door of high art because of his face. His greatest work bankrupted him. His body was placed in an unmarked pauper's grave. His orchestral manuscripts were thrown in the trash. Every one of these acts stands in violation of the covenant Yahweh established for the provision, protection, and honor of those He gifts with sacred sound. The judgment of Yahweh does not expire. The record does not close. It is open.

In 1976 — 59 years after his death — Scott Joplin received a posthumous Pulitzer Prize. His grave got a marker. His opera was finally staged. The world acknowledged what it had destroyed. **Yahweh does not need the world's acknowledgment to keep His record.** But it is worth noting: the world eventually confirmed what the covenant already knew. The man was worthy. The system was not.

"For Yahweh loves justice; He will not forsake His covenant ones. They are preserved forever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off."

— Tehillim (Psalms) 37:28

SERIES NOTES

Next in series: Report No. 2 — Ma Rainey: Mother of the Blues (c. 1886–1939). The woman who preceded Bessie Smith, created the form that would feed the entire recording industry, and received nothing from the race records system that profited from her voice.

Research standard: All charges in this series require a minimum of two to three independent authoritative sources per Devarim 19:15. No charge is entered on the basis of a single witness, rumor, or partisan source. The covenant demands truth — not accusation without evidence, not silence without accountability.

Selah.

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