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Let the good old times roll

As founder of the Old-Time Piano Playing Contest, Ted Lemen '69 keeps the past alive and singing.

By Carmen Marti

They are the siren songs of Ted Lemen's life: the steam whistle and clanging bell of an old Iron Horse as it rushes down the rails, the playful syncopation of a ragtime melody that has beckoned seekers of a good time for more than a century.

Lemen has dedicated his life to being a one-man preservation society, keeping these sounds of the past alive in an era where such anachronistic pleasures can be greeted with a puzzled stare.

But not here. Over Memorial Day weekend in late May at the downtown Hotel Pèrè Marquette in Peoria, true lovers of these early 20th-century institutions gathered for the annual World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest, created 29 years earlier by Lemen (pronounced lee-men) as a fund-raiser for the Monticello, Ill., Railroad Museum. Held "on the back of a caboose that had a platform big enough to accommodate an old upright," he recalls, the premiere event attracted 40 spectators and four contestants.

Although run by others now, Lemen still serves as master of ceremonies for the event, which moved to the Decatur Holiday Inn in 1987 and then to Peoria in 2002. This year's event attracted some 800 aficionados of old standards and ragtime music, who came to hear performances by "some of the most dedicated musicians in the world," as Lemen describes them.

The event's contestants squared off on Saturday and Sunday to determine who would win the grand prize and the bragging rights of being a world champion. Throughout the weekend, Lemen served as supportive friend to all of the performers, calming their jitters and making them feel at home. But Lemen's time to shine came during the "Afterglow" sessions, as the musicians and spectators unwound and strutted their stuff into the wee hours of the morning in two large rooms outfitted with extra pianos. The main stage set includes a restored, 120-year-old Weber upright piano and a painting of a suggestively reclined dance-hall girl. Introducing each performer from what he calls "the best seat in the house," Lemen stands center stage to lead the audience into



The stage where Lemen performs includes a 120-year-old upright piano and a painting of a dancehall girl that harkens to ragtime's bawdy past. (Photo by Lloyd DeGrane)

boisterous sing-a-longs of old chestnuts such as “Five Foot Two” and “In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree.”

As Lemen basked in the chorus of voices, young and old, he was in his element. For another year, he was able to savor the victory of winding back the flow of progress that threatens to take with it the grandeur of the past. The only thing that might make the moment even better would be the added sound of a solitary train whistle echoing through the cloudless night air.

* * *



Above, a treasured childhood photo Lemen took on his first steam locomotive ride with his aunt Doris.

When Lemen was a young boy, he loved to watch his father sing with the Forget-Me-Notes, a barbershop quartet based in Chicago’s western suburbs. The group rehearsed every week, rotating from one member’s house to the next. Since one singer in the group lived next door to Lemen, twice a month the sessions were held in his neighborhood. He remembers nights when the weather was nice, the group would sing outside under a streetlight’s soft glow.

“Everybody liked it,” Lemen recalls, “and I thought the admiration they felt was a stellar emotion, and one that I might want repeated for myself.”

Lemen got his first taste of performing when his parents would take him to “a great old horseshoe-shaped bar in Fox Lake, Ill.” As a lad of 6, he “used to sing in my boy-soprano voice with Winnie Noble, who knew every tune and everybody who came in,” he says. “Seeing her pound out old standards in nearly any key to accommodate the singing crowd was a fine talent as far as I was concerned. So, I started to emulate her at home.”

When he wasn’t listening to his father sing or plucking out tunes on the family’s Wurlitzer spinet piano, Lemen was playing with the other great love of his life: trains. He started with an American Flyer electric train set and eventually graduated to the smaller H-O scale sets, which he ran on a two-level, 4-by-12-foot table, complete with scenery. At age 13, Lemen went with his aunt Doris, now deceased, on his first trip on a steam locomotive. “It had a profound effect on my life thereafter,” Lemen says, “for which I will either scold her or thank her when I see her again.”

In 1964, Lemen enrolled at Illinois Wesleyan. Interested in writing, he majored in English and took journalism classes. But Lemen didn’t leave his passion for trains behind, and at IWU found two like-minded souls in classmates Bill Gillfillan ’69 and John Morris ’69. The three were stirred to action when the Burlington Railroad announced it would stop its popular steam train excursions in 1966. They devised a plan to go to St. Louis to ride the last steam train to depart that city’s Union Station and to try to generate support for continuing steam trips on the

Burlington. On the excursion, the students collected \$55, and when they got back to Bloomington they formally established the non-profit Society for the Preservation of Unretired Railfans (SPUR) with help from a lawyer who donated his time.

“By October of 1966,” Lemen says, “we had purchased an old steam locomotive in Indiana and moved it to Monticello, where we began pounding away on the rust. A few years later, we became the Monticello Railway Museum. The little engine we first bought is now displayed on a small piece of track near the Interstate 72 exit for the museum.”

* * *

At that point, Lemen says his interest in trains had started to interfere with his interest in college. He left IWU during his third year and went to work at another historical museum in Monticello, where SPUR had been relocated and where the Railway Museum now operates.

Lemen says his three years on campus had a lasting effect on him. “It gave me the opportunity to meet people from across the country and around the world,” he says. “It showed me what a sheltered life I had led up to that point.” In hindsight, he says, “I frequently wish I had graduated from Illinois Wesleyan after all. But that would mean having a far different life than I have had, and most of what’s transpired to date has been interesting.”

After leaving Illinois Wesleyan, Lemen worked on an excursion steam train running weekend tourist trips, served as general car foreman for the Chicago North Western Railroad overseeing the rebuilding of passenger cars for Chicago’s Metra system, managed a fleet of freight cars for Garvey International of Wichita, Kan., and traveled around the country leasing and selling boxcars for Garvey.

All the while, Lemen played the piano, landing his first paying gig while he was still an IWU student, performing off and on for four years at a Shakey’s Pizza Parlor, where live “old-time” music was part of the nostalgic ambience. He was hired there based on exposure he gained participating in a piano marathon in Bloomington, where he played continuously for nearly 58 hours. The competitive streak that marked his early musical endeavors (he recalls “cruising past the practice rooms in Presser Hall to see who sounded good that night”) helped give him the inspiration for creating a world championship for old-time piano players like himself.

It took some time before the term “world” could be convincingly added to the contest’s title, but three years after its premiere, Lemen could see that word of mouth was creating a buzz about the event when 500 people showed up to catch a line-up of 10 contestants and join in the “Afterglow,” a post-party where everyone is invited to sing along and play both piano and other instruments.

In 1987, the event moved indoors from the grounds of what officially became the Monticello Railway Museum. A new non-profit organization, the Old-Time Music Preservation Association, or OMPA (say it out loud), was started in 1990 to run the event. Workshops, dealer rooms, a “New Rag” contest, and a variety show have been added over time. After some degree of trial and error, organizers settled on a limited pool of 26 entrants, who come from across the United States, Canada and Europe.

“This is the elite of old-time music,” says contest coordinator, Judy Leschewski, an avid piano player and singer in her own right, who has volunteered to organize the event since 1977. “The players are so amazing,” she says.

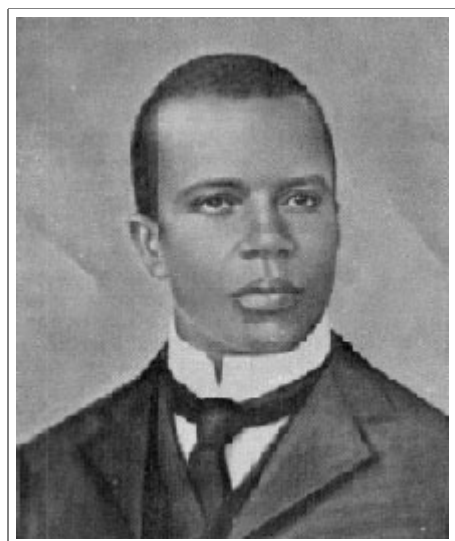
“Old-time” music is officially defined as popular tunes written between about 1880 and 1929. Leschewski defines it simply as “the last happy music,” composed before the Great Depression changed the tenor of the nation.

Ragtime is the musical style most closely associated with the contest, as well as with the early era of America’s railroads, when Scott Joplin tickled the ivories in “backrooms,” as Lemen phrases it, in towns along the railway. “It was not church music by any stretch of the imagination,” he says.

Ragtime’s bawdy reputation aside, the contest Lemen created comfortably fits the definition of family entertainment, as patrons ranging in age from 2 to 95 express their enthusiasm with thunderous bursts of applause and the constant tapping of toes. They smile and sway to classic tunes such as “Sidewalks of New York,” “April Showers,” and “Moonlight Bay” as well as more obscure gems like “Wrong Way to Tickle Mary” and “Cohen Owes Me \$97.00.”

But while the spectators are swaying and smiling, they are also judging the contestants for themselves. This is an informed and engaged audience. Pages in the program booklet are dedicated to a scorecard for keeping tallies. In the breaks between contestants, when emcee Lemen isn’t cracking corny jokes, the group breaks into song and it seems as though everyone knows each word to every tune.

The competition starts bright and early Saturday morning, as contestants draw lots to determine the order in which they will play. Junior division contestants perform throughout the day on Saturday, with the champion crowned that afternoon. Regular division contestants face off in a qualifying round on Saturday, and a field of 10 is chosen for Sunday’s semi-final round. From there, the judges pick a “Final Five” who compete in the final round to determine a champion. All finalists receive a cash prize, with the winner receiving \$1,200.



Ragtime genius Scott Joplin



As president of the Old-Time Music Preservation Association, Barb Schuler (shown above with her grandson Donny) helps keep the tradition alive. (Photo by Lloyd DeGrane)

This year's winner, Dan Mouyard, planned to pour his prize money back into his art, spending it on studio time to record his first CD. The 25-year-old Mouyard, who works in database management at the National Institutes of Health in Washington, D.C., has been competing in the championship since 1995, winning the junior competition in 1996.

Although players are attracted to the contest for the high level of competition it provides, they also like that it's structured to create a sense of fun and friendship. Says "Perf" (short for "perf'essor) Bill Edwards, who has been participating in the competition for 17 years and won it in 1991, "A lot of what I come here for is the camaraderie," he says. "The classical competitions are cut throat, but here we don't have that. We love what each other does."

In addition to the championship, Edwards attends old-time music festivals across the country. He can't compete anywhere else because no other competitions like the World Championship have survived. Says Lemen, "The other competitions that patterned themselves after us have gone by the wayside and here we are in our 30th year. We must be doing some formula right."

Nick Taylor — founder of the Bohemia Ragtime Society and the Ragtime Express mail-order catalog, and one of the five judges of the 2003 contest — contends that the championship presents "the best old-time music being played. It's hard to be a judge. We're trying to select among really talented people."

Finding the judges is also hard, both Lemen and Leschewski say. They try to vary the team every year, and they have to ensure that the members are qualified to assess a playing style that sends fingers flying at breakneck pace.

The judges rate performances on such criteria as articulation, phrasing, difficulty of arrangements, and mistakes. Since no sheet music is allowed, Lemen says, "Some [contestants] will get nervous and forget their place in the middle of a tune. Others will be driven to give the best performance of their lifetime."

Lemen says that being involved in the event "is one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had." He gives credit for its success to the work of "very dedicated people with multiple talents" who run it. "Judy has been a constant for 25 years," he says. "She is by far the busiest.

And Barb Schuler, the president of OMPA, comes over from Cincinnati to work with the folks from Illinois She runs the newsletter and keeps track of the administrative work for OMPA.”

Who will replace people like Leschewski and Schuler — and Lemen himself — when they finally decide to step down remains an open question. “We are looking for the people who can someday take our places,” he says.

Lemen knows from experience that may not be easy. Even the best ideas can run their course, as was the case with the Whistle Stop Diner, which Lemen and a group of partners opened in 1997 to serve up home-cooked meals and provide live piano music on Friday and Saturday nights.

Lemen got the idea for the diner while commuting from the Chicago area to Taylorville, Ill., to work on a steam locomotive he had purchased in 1995. En route, he happened upon an abandoned dance hall in Blue Mound, a small town near Decatur. The space had a stage and a rudimentary kitchen.

“So I decided to get back to Decatur,” Lemen says. “I felt all these years like a Central Illinois person, anyway. Having gone to Illinois Wesleyan and started the railway museum not too far away, in Monticello — and then the piano contest as a spin-off of that — I felt like there were more opportunities for me down here. It was closer to where I felt at home, more than I felt in the suburbs of Chicago all the years I lived there.”

But the economy after Sept. 11, 2001 took its toll. The Whistle Stop was forced to close last June. An announcement at the World Championship Old-Time Piano Playing Contest Web site (at <http://members.tripod.com/~oldtimepiano>) states simply: “THE WHISTLE STOP DINER HAS SHUT ITS DOORS AND IS NO LONGER IN BUSINESS. Live Ragtime music is no longer available in Central Illinois.”

Lemen fills his time working part-time jobs, including playing piano a couple of days a week at Von Maur in Decatur, an Iowa-based department store with a piano at its center. “It’s big, grand, and a delight to play,” he says.

Meanwhile, he is negotiating to sell the locomotive in Taylorville, too. “If I can complete the sale of the steam locomotive in the next month or two, that will considerably free up the concerns I have. I’m not really working on it anymore.

“It cost me my retirement and my savings,” Lemen says, “but I live with the knowledge that I saved one locomotive from getting cut up [for scrap]. And maybe someday, in the not-too-distant future, they may be running the locomotive, which would make me feel really good.”



Ted Lemen and friend get the Peoria crowd clapping with a medley of songs from hit parades past. (Photo by Lloyd DeGrane)

Despite the recent setback of his restaurant closing, Lemen says he has few regrets about it or any of the other sometimes unconventional choices he's made during his eventful life. His twin passions for ragtime and the railroad continue to give him some of his happiest moments, and have allowed him to share the delights of America's past with thousands in the present.

Carmen Marti is a Chicago-based freelance writer. She graduated from Stephens College in Columbia, Mo., with a B.F.A. in creative writing, and from the University of Chicago with an M.A. in English Language and Literature. She contributes to the Chicago Tribune, alumni magazines, and arts-related Web sites.