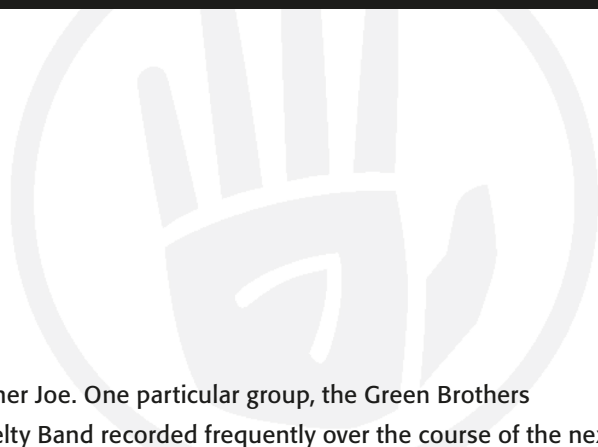




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George Hamilton Green, Novelty Music, and the Xylophone's Rise in Popularity

Reduction of an article from the May 2005 issue of the San Diego Troubadour newspaper entitled "Ragtime and the Golden Age of the Xylophone." For a copy of the full article, please contact Morris Palter at [morispalter@hotmail.com](mailto:morrispalter@hotmail.com)

By the start of the 1920's, the era of "novelty" ragtime music was fast approaching and the xylophone (which was now being mass-produced in America) lent itself well to the added complexity inherent in this music. This caused an unprecedented surge in both the popularity of novelty music and the xylophone itself. Out of this newfound popularity rose one of its most influential figures, George Hamilton Green, who was born on May 23rd, 1893 in Omaha, Nebraska into a musical family. A gifted pianist and violinist at an early age, George and his brother encountered their first xylophone in 1901. They were so enamored by the instrument that they didn't stop harassing their parents until they agreed to buy it for them. Because of his all-encompassing love for the xylophone, this was the instrument on which George would ultimately leave his musical legacy.

Green's career as a professional xylophonist can be broken down into three distinct categories: his recordings, his compositions, and most importantly, his playing and development of a school of pedagogy for the xylophone.

One of the most preferred instruments to record on early phonographs was the xylophone. Its acoustic properties and articulate nature produced clear recordings for the acoustic phonograph. Although xylophonists such as Charles P. Lowe, Chris Chapman, and Albert Benzler were hired by record companies to make recordings, it was George Hamilton Green who was recognized as the greatest of them all. In 1917, Green made his first xylophone recording for the Edison Company. George Hamilton Green recorded literally hundreds of works in addition to playing in various groups with and without his

brother Joe. One particular group, the Green Brothers Novelty Band recorded frequently over the course of the next two decades and ranged in size anywhere from eight to sixteen members, with up to three xylophone players!

In addition to recording, George made numerous live radio appearances including many with famed bandleader Paul Whiteman. A little known but interesting fact is that in 1927, George and Joe were joined by their youngest brother Lewis (1902-1992) and made history recording music for Steamboat Willie, The Opry House, and Skeleton Dance, Walt Disney's first animated sound cartoons – a wonderful slice of American music history!

By the mid-1920's, few composers were still writing purely ragtime pieces. Jazz music was slowly replacing ragtime as the most popular musical style in America, and composers were adjusting to this phenomenon. The influence of blues, when used in a ragtime tune, was clearly audible. Jazz, on the other hand, was what ragtime itself was developing into. It was during this "cross-over" period that novelty music emerged. Novelty music included all of the rhythmic elements now found in ragtime music and blended them with chromatic runs (playing side-by-side notes up or down the instrument) and quicker tempos. As well, a more developed harmonic structure formed the over-all basis for this novelty music. It was within this period that George Hamilton Green wrote many of his compositions including The Ragtime Robin, Cross-Corners, and The Whistler. The covers for these xylophone solo's read, "George Hamilton Green's Jazz Classics for the Xylophone: A Series of Modern Ragtime Solos with Piano Accompaniment," reflecting the ambiguity surrounding the popular musical genres of the time. The fact that these compositions are still performed by percussionists today attests to both their longevity and creativity. Much of this can also be attributed to percussionist Bob Becker (NEXUS, Steve Reich Ensemble) who single-handedly resurrected these tunes in the 1970's by making arrangements of them for percussion ensemble.

Perhaps Green's greatest contribution was the development of a systematic study for the xylophone and, with it, the subsequent awareness he was able to bring to the popular music styles of his time. In 1922, George and Joe Green published "Green Brothers Advanced Instructor for Xylophone." Still considered standard practice for modern day percussionists, the playing techniques included were not only revolutionary but they also spoke to the love and understanding both brothers had for the xylophone. What makes this book truly amazing is the level of detail that the Green brother's offer with respect to every aspect of xylophone playing.

In 1923, it was George who went on to publish 50 individual lessons available through mail-order called George Hamilton Green's New Instruction Course for Xylophone: A Complete Course of Fifty Lessons. This course of lessons focused on a systematic way of applying proper playing techniques to popular music forms, something that was not as specifically addressed in the Green Brothers method book.

In 1926, he followed up his 50 individual lessons with the New Series of Individual Instruction Courses for Xylophone and Marimba, providing the tools for learning how to improvise over existing melodies. The two books were and still are regarded as the best resources for becoming a better two-mallet player. Although Green was responsible for revolutionizing the way percussionists would forever play the xylophone, he was also interested in creating skilled ragtime players. Although books had been published that dealt with improvising techniques as applied to the popular music of the day (probably the earliest being Benjamin Harney's Rag Time Instructor, published in 1897), Green's was recognized as one of the first to do it during the novelty ragtime/early jazz era.

When one takes into consideration all of Green's achievements regarding the xylophone within the context of the ragtime music era, it is impossible to deny the impact ragtime music had on Green, or Green's contribution to the "mainstreaming" of ragtime music. It is ironic, however, that Green was much more interested in demonstrating to the world that the xylophone was a noble instrument than he was in trying to "mainstream" ragtime music, or become one of its greatest performers. For all the ragtime music he engaged in playing, he performed and recorded an equal amount of arranged classical repertoire. He was even a big proponent of Bach two-part inventions, which he would have his students practice, demonstrating

that Green thought of himself as a musician (who utilized the xylophone), before considering himself a player of any specific genre of music.

When all was said and done, what Green was most interested in doing was proving to people that the xylophone was capable of realizing a wide variety of musical styles, no different in many ways than that of the piano. Green was serious about the xylophone – it was not a gimmicky instrument to him. Rather, he believed it versatile and capable of being used in any sort of musical situation and he spent his professional musical career trying to show this.