

THE CAKEWALK

Contributed by: Dick Pierce

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the “Cakewalk” was a dance sensation that swept the country. It was a couples’ dance that very often took the form of a contest. Couples would form a large square with the men on the outside and the women on the inside and strut around the square in cadence to a lively tune. Judges considered the elegance, grace and inventiveness of the dancers and would eliminate couples one by one. The last couple remaining was awarded a large, highly decorated cake which had been in plain sight throughout the contest. Today the term “cakewalk” usually implies something that is very easy. The dance itself, however, could be physically demanding but always considered an enjoyable recreation. The common expression “takes the cake” also comes directly from this activity.

The original dance had African-American roots dating back to the early days of slavery in the South. On Sundays, when there was little work on the plantations, slaves would gather to do a high kicking, prancing couple’s “walk around,” accompanied mostly by banjos, fiddles and drums. Originally the intention was to parody the elegant, stately European dances of their owners, often with an exaggerated grace that was sometimes comical. The owners were mainly amused and delighted and often awarded a prize to the couple that was judged to be the best. At some point the custom began of offering a cake to the winning couple. According to one source, the cakewalk was still popular at the dances of “ordinary folks” after the Civil War.

Later the cakewalk was performed in minstrel shows and musicals by professional entertainers who achieved a level of virtuosity in their improvised moves. It evolved eventually in the 1890s into the dance that became wildly popular in fashionable ballrooms throughout the country.

As the dance grew in popularity, much music was published for the cakewalk, usually with “Cakewalk” in the title. One internet source lists over 145 pieces. Kerry Mills (composer of *Redwing*) wrote a number of cakewalks and is credited by some with starting the cakewalk craze. Typically the music was written in 2/4 time with two alternate heavy beats per measure, giving it the effect of an “oompah” rhythm. Many of the tunes have a minor key beginning and a major key ending.

In 1896 a young woman named Sadie Koninsky from Troy, New York walked into a large New York City music publisher with a letter of introduction and a tune that she had written. She was a department store clerk and ran a music counter. Dave Reed Jr., a well known lyricist of the time, wrote some words and *Eli Green’s Cakewalk* became a hit. (Who Eli Green was remains a mystery!) Its only real competition that year was *At a Georgia Camp Meeting* written by Kerry Mills, also a cakewalk. Miss Koninsky never wrote another hit.

As the first decade of the twentieth century came to an end, the cakewalk as a musical composition began to decline in popularity and gave way to the ragtime piano music of Scott Joplin and others. Although rags and cakewalks share many similarities, the cakewalk was intended primarily for dancing while the rags were written more for listening and are generally considered more “musically sophisticated.” There has been some mislabeling of rags as cakewalks and vice versa, partly because the two forms of music are syncopated and have an “intoxicating effect.” Nevertheless, the cakewalk is considered an important precursor to classic ragtime music. Like the rags, most cakewalks originally were written as piano compositions. Some of the music has been integrated into the old-time fiddle repertoire although not to the extent that the rags have been.

Enjoy playing the February Tune-of-the-Month, *Eli Green(e)’s Cakewalk!* (It is worthy of note here that another of our repertoire tunes, *Southern Aristocracy* also comes from this era and is classified as a cakewalk.)

