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"PERFESSOR" BILL'S GUIDE TO RAGTIME AND TRADITIONAL JAZZ COMPOSERS

Why a separate page for women composers? In part because they deserve equal recognition with the more prominent male composers, and they often get buried in that list. It was the women who more often had taken piano lessons, played ragtime in the home, demonstrated it in the stores, and who often understood better than many men composers the emotional aspects of the music. Most composed anywhere from their late teens through their late twenties or early thirties when many music-oriented careers were ended by marriage. Even while they were composing they often faced obstacles in the male-dominated publishing world. It is also telling that while both black and white males of all classes contributed to the pool of piano rags with some balance, the vast majority of female composers were white and from middle-class areas. There is an unfortunate dearth of biographical information for most of the women listed here, as the head of a household was usually the one polled for census or survey demographics, leaving little opportunity for details of the female family members to surface. For further information I may suggest certain reference sources, and for an overall view of good references currently available or tucked away in your local library, please check out my [Bibliography and Sources](#) page.

Many thanks go to hard-working Dr. Nora Hulse and her colleague Nan Bostick, who have both uncovered much of this nearly impossible-to-find information, and I was able to retrieve several interesting finds as well. You can visit Nora, the most prominent authority on women ragtime composers, at her web site, www.nora.hulse.com.

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|--|--------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| May Aufderheide | Charlotte Blake | Henriette Blanke-Belcher | Grace Balen | Lily Coffee |
| Irene Cozad | Ella Hudson Day | Geraldine Dohyng | Ethel May Earnest | Irene Giblin |
| Imogene Giles | Louise V. Gustin | May Irwin | Elsie Janis | Sadie Koninsky |
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| | | Gladys Yelvington | | |

Click on a name to view their biography below.



Henriette B. Blanke-Belcher Melson
(February 16, 1882 to March, 1958)

Compositions

1901 Lazarre: Waltzes	1909 Ain't You Coming Out Tonight [1,3] Honey-land [1,8,9] Lonesome Land [1,10]
1902 Hearts Courageous: Waltzes Franziska Waltzes	1910 Maxine: Waltzes [1] Love Dreams [1] Telling Lies [1,11] A Withered Rose [1,12]
Cubanola: A Spanish Love Serenade	1911 Just as Long as the Swanee Flows [1] My Irish Girl [1,13] There's a Ring Around the Moon [1,13] Polaire (c. 1911) [1]
1903 Under the Rose: Waltzes Peggy O'Neil Waltzes I'm Longing For You Every Day My Wigwag Queen [2] Songs We Used to Sing [2] Colleen: An Irish Love Song [3]	1918 Loyalty Waltz [1]
1904 My Lady of the North: Waltzes	1922 Butterfly Waltzes [14]
1905 The Little House that Love Built [4] Hearts' Haven Waltzes [1]	
1906 When the Mocking Birds are Singing in the Wildwood [1] When the Violets Whisper Marie [1,4] Stingy Moon [1,5]	1. As Henriette B. Blanke-Belcher 2. w/James O'Dea 3. w/Eddie Dustin 4. w/Arthur J. Lamb 5. w/Will Healan 6. w/B.B. Ellison 7. w/Edward Madden 8. w/Ren Shields 9. w/Stanley Murphy 10. w/Bartley C. Costello 11. w/Irving Berlin 12. w/Scarlet LeRoy 13. w/Alfred Bryan 14. as Henriette B. Blanke-Melson
1907 The Enchantress: Waltzes [1] In the Good Old Irish Way: A Celtic Waltz Song [1,5]	
1908 The New Barn Dance [1] Marsovia: Waltzes [1] I Will Try [1,6] There's Nothing in the World Like Love [1,7]	

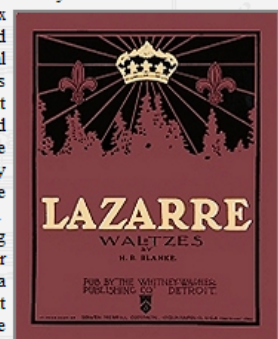
Henriette Blanke is not one of the prominent figures of ragtime composition by any stretch, focusing largely on waltzes and mood pieces during her decade-long career. However, her presence as a woman composer in the ragtime era and the considerable sales of her works cannot be ignored, thus her inclusion in this set of biographies. Also, recent searches by the author have uncovered a lot more information about her than was previously known, which helps to fill in her overall story a bit better.

Henriette was born to Max and Dora Blanke (often spelled Blank) in Kansas City, Missouri. Max was a Romanian immigrant and Dora a New York native of German immigrant parents. They married when Dora was 17 to Max's 25, and the pair lived briefly in Humboldt, Nebraska where Max worked in a restaurant. The couple moved to Kansas City by late 1881, and Henriette was born soon after. Note that she through around 1910 the actual birth year of 1882 was cited, but later in life she preferred using 1883, which is a typically mild deflation of age frequently found among composers at that time. Henriette was followed by younger sister Lena in 1884. The family had moved back to Nebraska by 1888 when daughter Pearl was born, and the Blanke's last child, Celia, was born in Illinois in 1891. They subsequently moved again to Detroit, Michigan, where Max died in the mid 1890s. In the 1900 Census Dora is shown a widow living with her four daughters in Detroit.

Henriette had obviously received both public school and private training in music. Most girls of that time received training in piano and some other instrument, usually stringed, so with a houseful of girls there was possibly a houseful of music. By age 17 she had secured a job with Whitney-Warner, at that time the largest of the Detroit music publishers. Continuing to receive training in composition, harmony and theory after hours, it was said she quickly worked her way to "a responsible position," likely as either a pianist and music demonstrator or as an arranger. In the 1900 Census Henriette is listed as a musician.

In 1901, dairy farm magnate Jerome H. Remick decided to get into the music publishing business, and one of his first acquisitions was Whitney Warner and all of its assets. He then made a call for new compositions for the catalog, and Miss Blanke answered the request by composing *Lazarre: Waltzes*. It hit the shelves running and the first printing, presumably of 2000 to 3000 copies, sold out in less than two weeks, requiring a second run. There were more reprints in its future as *Lazarre* was one of the more popular waltzes in the Remick catalog over the next decade. It also launched Henriette's career as a composer.

The following year saw at least three entries from Henriette, who was in the beginning billed (as many women were) as the non-gender specific H.B. Blanke. Two were similarly successful waltzes - a classic form considered by some to be a respectable alternative to the still new ragtime music. The third, *Cubanola*, was a Spanish serenade, showing that Henriette was in touch with current trends and tastes as well. She also continued to work in the main Detroit office of Remick as the owner was starting to branch out to New York City. In 1903 more waltzes were forthcoming, but so were her first songs, penned with lyricist James O'Dea. One of them, *My Wigwag Queen*, was a result of the recent trend towards



"Indian-themed" pieces which was started by one of Remick's primary managers, Charles N. Daniels, with his 1901 composition *Hiawatha*.

The year 1905 would prove to be a banner one for Henriette, whose name on music covers was now sometimes used interchangeably with the perhaps more poetic Henriette. In addition to another hit, *Hearts' Haven Waltzes*, and increased sales of the popular *Colleen: An Irish Love*

the perhaps more poetic Henrietta. In addition to another hit, *Heart's Haven Waltzes*, and increased sales of the popular *Colleen - An Irish Love Song* from 1903, she had another social hit when she got married. Miss Blanke had previously caught the attention of one of **Frederick E. Belcher**, Remick's New York manager and Vice President of the publishing firm. The Providence, Rhode Island native was already married, showing in the 1900 Census living with his wife and daughter, both named Emma, and listed as a dealer in music. In the next four years he had improved his position considerably, but his home life became a casualty.



A few months after his divorce, 35-year-old **Fred Belcher** married Henrietta just before her 23rd birthday in an extravagant affair held at the **Russell House** in Detroit. It was attended by many top names in the growing music publishing business. Advance notice of the event appeared in **The Music Trade Review** of February 11, 1905: "On St. Valentine's day **Fred Belcher**, manager of the New York house of **Jerome H. Remick & Co.**, will be united in marriage to Miss **Henrietta Blanke**, a writer on the staff of the Detroit headquarters for several years, several of her instrumentals achieving no mean fame. Following the wedding the happy couple will visit the leading eastern cities, though Mr. Belcher insists the trip is taken in the ordinary course of business and is not to be a honeymoon jaunt at all. Be this as it may, in retiring from the ranks of bachelorhood Mr. Belcher is to be felicitated in winning so charming a bride. During his absence Mr. Remick will come east, after looking over the field in St. Louis, Kansas City and Chicago, and take charge." The now-hyphenated **Henrietta Blanke-Belcher** relocated to New York to enjoy a life of luxury with her new husband.



While Henrietta continued to compose, she also became quickly accustomed to the finer things in life. Her pieces of 1906 and 1907 sold largely because of her name, but seemed to show only moderate effort to some degree. In the mean time, she was making the society page and snippets of trade news as was her husband as a result of their sometimes ostentatious lifestyle. The couple traveled extensively throughout the United States and Europe. Belcher's 1907 passport application (Henrietta's was not located as often wives were admitted on their husband's passport) shows him as a music publisher living at the north end of Central Park West in Manhattan. He reportedly enjoyed driving custom built touring automobiles made in Detroit explicitly for him, and wore such fine European shirts that his wardrobe often overshadowed his wife's, which was similarly replete with fine dresses and fur coats. Henrietta was described by retired hit composer **Monroe Rosenfeld** as "a prepossessing woman... one of the most beautiful girls in the musical arena." On August 26 of 1906, Henrietta gave birth to her only child, **Maxine F. Belcher**, who presumably joined her parents on some of their travels with a nanny in tow.

In 1908 Mrs. Blanke-Belcher came fairly close to ragtime with her instrumental *The New Barn Dance*, and her lovely *Marsovia: Waltzes* reestablished her role as "America's Waltz Queen," an image that would be pushed by Remick in coming years. The following year Henrietta headed for the stage, playing for a time in vaudeville when not traveling, and presumably promoting her own material. This may have included two songs composed in 1909 with **Bartley C. Costello**, among them the considerable hit *Ain't You Coming Out To-Night?*. Then in 1910 she had the distinction of writing a song with the still largely unknown **Irving Berlin**, *Telling Lies*. That same year brought forth another waltz hit, *Maxine: Waltzes*, named for and dedicated to her young daughter.

In a profile on women composers of note printed in **The San Francisco [California] Sunday Call** on November 20, 1910, Blanke talked about her songwriting and collaboration process:

Mrs. Blanke-Belcher writes only the music to her songs, collaborating with some one who suits her with the lyrics. While the words of a popular song may seem unimportant compared with the music, they really help to make the song a success or failure. As one publisher explained it, "the words must have at least one catchy line and be filled with sentiment or gush," as he called it, "to make it take with the popular song singing public."

Mrs. Blanke-Belcher writes the score of her song first and then has the words fitted to it. She is very critical with her collaborator and often changes so that her songs are rather more varied in sentiment than those of many of the other writers. Her best known one is "Love Dreams." She has a flattering reputation as the composer of "Lazarre Waltzes" and the "Enchantress Waltzes," this rhythmic dance measure being her favorite both for songs and instrumental compositions.

At least one of Henrietta's works was orchestrated for cinema by Remick arranger **J. Bodewalt Lampe**, and was titled *Polaire*, likely in honor of the French singer and actress **Emilie Marie Bouchaud** who used Mlle. Polaire as a stage name, and was known for her obscenely tiny waist. Even more hits were forthcoming in 1911, and by 1912 the **American Music and Art Journal** described Mrs. Blanke-Belcher as "one of the big successes of the Remick staff," in spite of a rather light output compared to many other composers. But in spite of these successes, not all was well on the home front.

The 1910 Census shows the Belchers living in high style, with Fred listed as a publisher (of books, but this may be an error), Henrietta as a composer, and a young Hungarian servant in the household as well. However, there are very often difficulties in "show business" marriages, and that of Fred and Henrietta was no exception. They divorced in 1912, an event which made the society news as much then as it may have a century later. Almost immediately Henrietta seems to have dropped off the map as there were no more compositions or vaudeville performances forthcoming. Fred continued in his role with Remick for several years, but died in 1919 at age 50 of complications from a surgery for appendicitis.

Henrietta did resurface for one composition in 1918 in support of the war effort in Europe, the *Loyalty Waltz*. Soon after that she remarried to a British immigrant of German parents, **Ralph Melson**. Ralph was a few months younger than Henrietta, and a successful stockbroker. The 1920 Census shows the couple living on Riverside Drive in Manhattan with Maxine, but no occupation listed for Henrietta, who was by now nearly retired from music. One last piece, possibly composed earlier but released to a piano roll in 1922, was *Butterfly Waltzes*, the only one credited to her as Henrietta B. Blanke Melson.

As of the 1930 Census the Melsons had moved and were now living at the Plymouth/Mayflower building located at Central Park West, and could therefore be considered fairly comfortable in spite of the declining financial climate of the city. Henrietta was able to resume the lifestyle in which she had become accustomed, and the couple traveled extensively throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Manifests show them on pleasure cruises to and from various ports in Europe, Aruba, the Pacific Coast via the Panama Canal, and even Canada. The last trace of Henrietta and Ralph is in 1937 when in their mid fifties they cruised on the Statendam. They later retired to the Miami, Florida area where Henrietta passed on at the age of 76. Ralph subsequently returned to Manhattan and died there in October 1967 at age 85.




Even though Henrietta never returned to music, her compositions remained staples in the Remick catalog nearly to the end of its run in 1929. She was one of the exceptions - a woman composer who continued her career even after she was married, although it may have cost her that marriage to some degree (though one must consider that Belcher had already divorced one wife). She was one of the few who managed to keep the waltz as a viable music and dance form in the midst of a flood of syncopated rags and songs, yet managed to remain current to some degree as well.

Thanks to Ragtime Women historian **Nora Hulse**, for information article citations on Henrietta's time in Detroit and some of the details on her marriage to Belcher. The remaining information was researched by the author from numerous public records and assorted articles.

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