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THE REAL AMERICAN FOLK SONG

By CINDY MARVELL

"Teddy Roosevelt loved ragtime. Woodrow Wilson didn't like it. Calvin Coolidge wouldn't say." So writes Max Morath of Woodcliff Lake in "The Road to Ragtime," to be published on Sept. 1 by the Donning Company Publishers of Virginia.

With 10 CD's, a Web site (www.maxmorath.com) and a master's degree in American studies from Columbia University, the author is a fountain of knowledge about his subject. Mr. Morath, 73, grew up with ragtime in his blood (his mother played piano for silent films), and it still oozes out of his fingers and onto the keyboard, whether piano or computer. "Ragtime's magic brew of sweet melody, chromatic harmony and impelling syncopation does indeed bypass the intellect and go directly into the bloodstream," he writes. "The real American folk song is a rag, a mental jag, a tonic for the blues."

He left his native Colorado for New Jersey in the 1960's with dates at the Blue Angel in Manhattan, a contract with Columbia Records and a commission to create "Max's Ragtime Era" for public television. Still, he credits the 1973 movie "The Sting," scored with Scott Joplin rags, with igniting modern America's passion for ragtime. "It was anachronistic, but it worked," he said recently, having just attended the annual Scott Joplin Ragtime Festival in Sedalia, Mo.

The lively coffee-table book, sprinkled with photographs by Diane Fay Skomars, his touring partner and wife, includes tender shots of Newark

International Airport, the gateway to the couple's suburban life as parents and recording artists. Ralph Schoenstein, a Princeton writer and humorist featured on "All Things Considered" on National Public Radio, wrote commentary. The book may be ordered from Larsmont Inc., Post Office Box 8680, Woodcliff Lake, N.J. 07675; fax, (201) 476-9052.