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Volume 112, Number 153

# LIVE!

## The magical, musical time machine

Ragtime orchestra to open Heider season

**MICHAEL MARTIN**  
 For the La Crosse Tribune

"Everyone's heard us, but no one's heard of us." That's how Rick Benjamin, the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra's founder and director, describes the unusual relationship the PRO has with new audiences.

In existence for 30 years, the orchestra has been heard on motion picture soundtracks, on National Public Radio and PBS as well as television series — the most recent examples being episodes of "American Horror Story" and "Boardwalk Empire."

In addition, since 1989 the PRO has provided the outdoor theme music for Disneyland's Main Street USA. Meanwhile, the orchestra has an international following and has recorded and performed all over the world in pursuit of its mission championing the American music that preceded jazz.

"We want to help people reclaim their musical heritage," Benjamin said.

Played with the same instrumentation and using the original scores, that music can be a kind of time machine that takes people back to what their great-grandparents were listening to a century or so ago.

"The music before jazz was vital to the development of America — it's our cultural heritage," Benjamin said. "Someone needs



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra, pictured here in Thomas Edison's laboratory, will perform Monday, Oct. 26, at the Marie W. Heider Center for the Arts in West Salem.

**IF YOU GO**  
**WHAT:** The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra  
**WHEN:** 7:30 p.m. Monday, Oct. 26  
**WHERE:** Marie W. Heider Center for the Arts, 405 E. Hamlin St., West Salem  
**COST:** \$24, \$22 for students and senior citizens  
**BOX OFFICE:** Hours are noon to 7 p.m. on Mondays, noon to 4 p.m. on Wednesdays and Fridays. Call 786-2550

to preserve it so we try to be absolutely authentic. Over thousands of performances we've learned how to make the show fun and engaging. People are going to hear beautiful music played from original scores and hopefully go out and tell others about it."

Benjamin will be master of ceremonies for the Oct. 26 show at the Marie W. Heider Center in West Salem. It's called "Scott Joplin and the Original Kings of Ragtime," and during the evening Benjamin will share stories about ragtime, marches, dance steps and once-popular songs from Tin Pan Alley and "this new thing called Broadway."

There will be 12 musicians on stage at the Heider Center that Monday — the standard grouping between 1870 and 1920, according to Benjamin. Instruments played will include drums, flute, coronet, clarinet, violins, a viola, a cello, a bass and, of course, piano.

The musicians recruited for the PRO are mostly graduates of major music conservatories. "This is pretty hard stuff to play," Benjamin said. "Plus we have to teach them how to inflect particular passages — the whole performing style is different (from

today)."

The PRO came into being as the result of Benjamin's 1985 discovery of thousands of turn-of-the-century orchestra scores once belonging to a Victrola recording star named Arthur Pryor. But Benjamin, who comes from a musical family, said his fascination with ragtime and associated music actually began long before that.

Benjamin was only 8 years old when he found an old wind-up Victrola from 1917 and some wax records in his grandmother's garage. He cranked it up and started listening to those records, fascinated by the "voices on the other side of that wooden box."

He pleaded with his dad to be allowed to take the Victrola home. Once there, he began listening and then collecting old records. "That music was exciting to me, compared to the pop music from the Gerald Ford era," Benjamin said. Talks with a grandfather who played in a band in the 1920s further whetted his interest.

Benjamin now owns more than 20,000 antique theater and dance orchestra scores written between 1875 and 1925. His

collection, which weighs 2½ tons — is one reason he made the move from Manhattan to Parkersburg, Pennsylvania.

"It's a lot cheaper to store things here," he said.

Although one might be tempted to conclude Benjamin has most of the music from that era, that conclusion would be far from the truth. "There were at least 250,000 songs written between 1860 and 1929," Benjamin said. "It's mind-boggling, and what I have is just a snapshot."

Benjamin was pleased when he learned that other musicians have raved about the Heider Center's acoustics. "That's one less thing I have to worry about," he said. "When you're on tour, you just never know what you may be walking into."

The current tour, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, will bring the PRO back to Wisconsin.

"We've toured there at least four times since 1990 (although never before to the Coulee Region)," he said. "The audiences are great — it's real America and at this stage in my career those are the audiences I most enjoy playing for."

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### > THIS WEEKEND IN ENTERTAINMENT

**Comedy**

**Stand-up comedy**, 9-10:30 p.m. Friday, Piggy's Blues Lounge, 501 S. Front St., La Crosse, \$8, 608-784-4877.

**Dance**

**Larry Busch Band**, Friday, 7 p.m. swing dance lesson, 8 to 11 p.m. dance, Concordia Ballroom, 1129 La Crosse St., La Crosse, \$10; \$5 for students, 608-782-6461.

**Rhythm Playboys**, 1-5 p.m. Saturday, Mill Road Banquet Center, 20020 Mill Road, Galesville, 608-539-5912.

**Hayes Boys Band**, 1-5 p.m. Sunday, The Concordia Ballroom, 1129 La Crosse St., La Crosse, \$8, 608-782-7049.

**Music**

**Scotter McCarty and Friends**, 8 p.m.-midnight Thursday, Recovery Room Sports Bar and Grill, 901 S. Seventh St., La Crosse, 608-782-8573.

**Gregg "Cheech" Hall**, 7-10:30 p.m. Thursday, Historic Trempealeau Hotel, 1132 Main St., Trempealeau, donations, 608-534-6898.

**Kies & Kompanie**, 5-8 p.m. Thursday, Starlite Lounge, 222 Pearl St., La Crosse, 608-796-0905.

**Under Paris Skies**, 5-8 p.m. Thursday, Stoney Creek Inn, 3060 S. Kinney Coulee Road, Onalaska, 608-781-3060.

**The BoGarts Reunion**, 10 p.m.-2:15 a.m. Friday, Popcorn Tavern, 308 S. Fourth St., La Crosse, \$5, 608-782-9069.

**Hamilton Loomis**, 9:30-11:30 p.m. Friday, Trempealeau Hotel, 1132 Main St., Trempealeau, \$8, 608-534-6898.

**The Wrong Omar**, 9-11:40 p.m. Friday, The Root Note, 115 S. Fourth St., La Crosse, 608-782-7668.

**Cheech and the Family Band**, 8 p.m.-12 a.m. Friday, Helm Bar, 108 N. Third St., La Crosse, 608-784-1040.

**Under Paris Skies**, 8-11 p.m. Friday, Bodega Brew Pub, 122 S. Fourth St., La Crosse, 608-782-0677.

**Ontourage**, 8 p.m.-12 a.m. Friday, Robin's Nest, La Crosse, 608-606-2088.

**The Dan and Brad Show**, 6-10 p.m. Friday, Moose Lodge, 1920 Ward Ave., La Crosse, 608-788-2998.

**Humanities in Medicine Concert Series**, pianist Mary Ann Gschwind, 12-1 p.m. Friday, Market Place cafeteria, Mayo Clinic Health System, 700 West Ave S, La Crosse, 608-738-8783.

**The Hobo Nephews of Uncle Frank**, 10 p.m.-2 a.m. Saturday, Popcorn Tavern, 308 S. Fourth St., La Crosse, \$5, 608-782-9069.

**Ontourage**, 9 p.m.-1 a.m. Saturday, Our Corner Bar, La Crosse, 608-606-2088.

**The Stoney Ridge Band**, 8 p.m.-midnight Saturday, Robins Nest, 328 Goddard St., La Crosse, 608-788-7021.

**Doghouse Jon and the Misbehavers**, 8-11:30 p.m. Saturday, Piggy's Blues Lounge, 501 S. Front St., La Crosse, 608-784-4877.

**Heartfield**, 8-11 p.m. Saturday, Leo & Leona's, 608-452-3637.

**Under Paris Skies**, 7-10 p.m. Saturday, The Wine Guyz, 122

King St., La Crosse, 608-785-1518.

**Quenten Brown**, 7-10 p.m. Saturday, JavaVino, 2311 State Road, La Crosse, 787-5282.

**Dominic and Tommy Brothers**, 3-6 p.m. Saturday, Elmaro Vineyards, N14898 Delaney Road, Trempealeau, 608-534-6456.

**UW-La Crosse Orchestra**, 2 p.m. Sunday, Viterbo Fine Arts Center, La Crosse, Admission is free, non-perishable food items will be accepted. 608-785-8409.

**Theater**

**"Proof"**, 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday; \$16 adults; \$14 senior citizens/non-UW-L students; and \$5 UW-L students; Toland Theatre, 333 N. 16th Street, UW-L, 608-785-8522.

**Coulee Region Unscripted: "Improvvised Tales of Terror"**, 7:30-9 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday, Pump House Regional Arts Center, 119 King St., La Crosse, \$12 to \$15, 608-785-1434.

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