

J. Lawrence Cook was by far the world's most prolific and versatile player roll arranger. His playing spanned the gamut from nursery rhymes to concertos. He could copy the styles of any artist and issue rolls in that artist's name, with only a signed release acknowledging the authenticity of the arrangement.

Lawrence was a genius and a brilliant musician who had a talent selling great arrangements of any kind of a song. Most player roll arrangers were not "in-house" musicians with assigned music to arrange. They had their own arrangements of favorites or specialties which they recorded from time to time, and were certainly on call by the roll companies, but Mr. Cook was a member of the staff. As an employee of QRS for many years, he was given assignments and yet because of his genius, he kept QRS the favorite company among all other producers of music rolls. Soon there was only one producer of new music left. That was QRS. Cook was the primary reason behind this phenomenal success. There has been no one to match his output or his talent, before or since.

It takes a special ability to create a personal style of playing that everyone immediately recognizes and can't get enough of. That is as creative as writing hit songs. But besides having this ability, Lawrence was able to copy styles, and do so a note at a time, so that in about 4 hours of arranging, he had a credible 3 minute performance which sounded very much like the great ragtime pianists of his day. Few other arrangers could even come close to such brilliance, and few succeeded. Lawrence never failed to please his fans, of which I am certainly one!

One of J. Lawrence Cook's great styles of playing was called "Swing." That was a piano style which he developed which sounded very much like hand playing, but with intervals and embellishments that required on occasion more than 2 hands. It was very well balanced in that it didn't require many notes all playing at once to create the famous, happy player-piano style. This was especially appreciated in the 40's and 50's by owners whose own players were wearing out and needed to be rebuilt! But even in a completely restored player, those rolls are perfectly arranged. You cannot improve on them by adding chords, ornamentation, or anything else. They are, for the large part, musical works of art. In addition, Lawrence created thousands of rolls in the traditional 20's player styles, which bubble along happily, filling the lucky home with richly chorded, definitive, inventive player piano music for chorus after chorus, with all the lyrics and verses intact.

One such example of the player piano style is Breezin' Along With The Breeze. It is called a "marimba" arrangement, as you will see here. This is an early style of player arrangement and is so appropriate for this old ballad, which utilizes rich chords and intervals called tenths to give such dimension and creates the unforgettable imprint which this arrangement has on you. Once you've heard it, you say, "That's a good arrangement," and then you can't see how it could ever be improved upon. I call that, "Owning the tune." J. Lawrence Cook did that so often, there wasn't anything else that could be said about that song. He "owned it!"

The player piano style is an art form in itself. It is a method of playing the piano that no human being can actually duplicate by hand, so hand played arrangements were largely the venue of the reproducing players, which required much more sophistication to add the pedaling and

expression which must be present if a piano is to sound hand-played. J. Lawrence Cook's art was in the field we know of today as the 88 note player, as opposed to reproducing rolls. This in no way deprecates his vast talent. In fact, when we realize that all of his music was arranged according to a scale, on a musical dynamic "drafting board," so to speak, and that he could hear in his mind's ear the music he was seeing as a layout of holes in paper, with the complex and off-time impeccable rhythm of ragtime and swing jazz, it is absolutely amazing. Here is an example of Mr. Cook's perfect raggy rhythm in an all-time favorite, "Way Down Yonder In New Orleans." Notice all the change-ups and beautiful, natural way he changes the key.

Lawrence recorded all of the classic rolls which QRS cut, during his employment as their staff arranger. But if you were asked, as the resident artist, to cut a roll of Nursery Rhymes, how would you do it, and sell the roll to people who are too old for Nursery Rhymes, but still make the music fascinating to kids who are just the right age? Think about that problem for a minute and then listen to how Mr. Cook accomplished this.