

REVIEW

Ragtime player treats group

By Charles Lehnert

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Concertgoers at Muskegon Community College's Overbrook Theater were treated to a demonstration of piano-playing-as-aerobic-exercise Friday night. Ragtime player Bob Milne — brought to town by the Muskegon Service League — let 'em have it with both barrels — as in barrelhouse piano, that is.

The concert began with Milne's appearance on stage dressed in a somewhat ruffled tuxedo, which he soon shed. His unassuming demeanor had that rode-hard-and-put-away-wet look, which left the uninitiated patrons completely unprepared for the fireworks which followed. Milne opened the concert with "Carrie's Gone to Kansas City," which started out slowly and picked up steam, until it fully involved Milne's hands, arms and feet.

Next was a medley of songs put together by John William Boone, a Missouri pianist whose career spanned about 30 years centering around 1900. Boone always opened his concerts with a hymn, and Milne preserved the tradition with Boone's arrangement of "I Love To Tell the Story." Unless you attended Sunday school in New Orleans in about 1903, you never heard it played this way. Milne followed the hymn tune with two Boone tunes, liberally sprinkled with key changes. His fingers fairly danced across the keyboard of the Steinway concert grand, drawing vocal appreciation from the half-filled house.

To create a flavor for the history of ragtime music, he prefaced his selections with interesting historical anecdotes. It was during one of these brief monologues that an infant in the house chimed in with a monologue of its own. Milne turned to the piano and struck the familiar opening re-re-so, re-re-so of Brahms' lullaby, drawing a sympathetic chuckle from the house.

Milne treated the audience to some technical feats. He told about St. Louis pianist and bar owner Tom Turpin, who played the piano in his own establishment standing up. The instrument was raised on blocks to permit this, which meant the pedals were out of reach.

Milne dazzled the audience with his energetic rendition of a typical Texas barrelhouse boogie based on the venerable 12-bar-blues motif. This piece received the loudest hoots and applause from the audience thus far. He followed it up with Scott Joplin's famous "Maple Leaf Rag." Those in the audience who are familiar with the piece were treated to a refreshing, rollicking arrangement ala Milne.

Milne wound up his first set with the story of James P. Johnson's reply to a patron who asked if he ever heard Beethoven's Fifth: a ragtime-style reading of the symphony's immortal opening theme; and an astonishing arrangement of "Ida, Sweet as Apple Cider," played in the piano-roll style.

Following a ten-minute break, Milne returned to the stage and told another anecdote about how ragtime's most-performed piece, the "Twelfth Street Rag" came to be named, and then banged the piece out. Milne's amazing technique drew applause during the performance. He followed it with a medley of two Southern hymns, "Closer Walk" and "Glory Land," which were the closest Milne ever came to 'straight' piano playing.

Then came a delightful dissertation on Dixieland, featuring Milne explaining the structure of the music while performing it, mimicking the traditional Dixieland instruments on the keyboard.

The evening's highlight came when Milne performed a ragtime piece of his own composing, the "Ragged Music Box." He billed it music that W. A. Mozart might have written, if it had occurred to Mozart to invent ragtime. The piece was a delicate collection of baroque trills and melodies that glistened like a spring morning's dew, punctuated by the right hand's syncopated rhythms.

Milne ended the concert with Meade Lewis' "Honky Tonk Train Blues," which had the distinction of being performed a few times in no less grand a venue than Carnegie Hall.

Ragtime music that has its roots in the juke joints of the South, and grew up in the honky-tonks of Chicago and New Orleans. It was fitting, then, that the refreshments at the reception following the concert were lovingly baked by members of the Service League, like the vittles in the honky-tonks probably came from the kitchens of the local farmers. The cookies were every bit as good as the music.