

Bush Sr. honors piano player

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staff reporter

C'ville man to play at Bush's Maine home

COLUMBIAVILLE—The musical magic from Bob Milne's piano keys will entertain both a former U.S. president and the leader of the nation's oldest cultural institution.

Milne has been invited by former President George Bush to perform at a July gathering in his Maine home. He was also asked by Librarian of Congress James H. Billington to play in the world's

largest library.

The elder Bush's invitation came as a complete surprise to Milne. Milne's talent came to mind when Bush asked his nephew's wife, Robin Ellis, to get him a really good piano player.

"I told him I'd get him the best piano player in the world," said Ellis. "I'd seen Bob play at a club in Boston."

Milne said he was stunned when he received an e-mail from Bush's personal secretary, Jean Becker, asking him to play at a fundraising event.

"She said Mr. Bush was throwing a party in his house Saturday and wanted to know if I was available," said Milne. "I said I was and then she e-mailed back and apologized, saying someone else had

hired a band."

Becker said Bush wanted to hear Milne and mentioned three other dates. Milne said he'd already booked concerts and he couldn't cancel and disappoint people.

"I said I was playing a concert 200 miles away in northern

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Vermont and if Mr. Bush wants me, I could play the next day," said Milne. "She called back and said he was thrilled. He invited my wife and I for dinner."

Becker asked to make hotel arrangements for the Milnes and his photographer and friend Richard Berry.

"I explained that Mr. Berry would like a hotel, but my wife and I stay and travel in our little motor home," said Milne. "She laughed and said she was at a loss. She didn't know where to arrange for a nearby campground."

Milne said he was happy to stay at a nearby Wal-Mart parking lot because the store allows RV campers to spend a night.

Milne was ecstatic when he received word Bush wanted him to stay at a guest cottage on Walker's Point.

"Of course I said yes," said Milne. "It's an honor; it's like staying in his backyard. I'll be staying at the Bush compound."

For those not able to see Milne in concert, his unique style will be preserved in history at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.

Memorabilia from Milne, a ragtime and boogie-woogie pianist, will be saved for future viewing with such diverse treasures as Thomas Jefferson's handwritten draft of the Declaration of Independence and one of the earliest-known baseball cards.

The Library of Congress is the



Photo by MIKE MERCIER

A day in the life of Bob Milne recently was filmed for the Library of Congress by freelance director Kirk Moreland of Farmington Hills.

nation's oldest federal cultural institution and serves as the research arm of Congress. It has the largest library in the world with nearly 128 million items on approximately 530 miles of book shelves. Collections include more than 29 million books and other printed materials, 2.7 million recordings, 12 million photographs, 4.8 million maps and 57 million manuscripts.

At a recent California concert, Billington saw and met Milne. Then Billington saw Milne's concert at Princeton University in late May and asked to record his music for posterity.

Milne will be a part of the library's American Music project. The Library of Congress recently recorded Dolly Parton for the same project.

"He said he wanted to document my life," said Milne. "He said I have an

unusual way of playing. They are making a film of a day in my life and when I go to the library in October, they'll record more."

The library hired freelance director Kirk Moreland of Farmington Hills to record Milne's life. He was at Milne's home this week.

"He's following me around and just recording what I do," said Milne. "This and the concert for (former) President Bush are the most exciting things that have ever happened to me."

Milne began his musical career as a French horn virtuoso in the late 1960s. He performed in symphonies at the Rochester Philharmonic and the Baltimore Symphony. When the performances ended each evening, the musicians played for fun in local saloons. Bob didn't carry his horn with him and soon found himself at the piano, learning to accompany singers.

"I'm self-taught on the piano," said Milne. "I was a semi-professional pool player and there are many similarities between playing pool and the piano. Pool is not a slam-bang thing; it is a work of art."

Milne used his pool-playing techniques to learn the piano. He added showmanship and soon was paid for having fun. Many times he only used the black keys while playing.

"I'd play at the corner bars and the pianos were beat on. The white keys were busted," Milne said. "If I wanted to get paid, I had to play on the black notes to make it sound good."

Milne specializes in ragtime, boogie-woogie and turn-of-the-century pieces. He is nationally known for his technique and showmanship.