

Pianist energetically keeps American art form alive

By PHILIP H. FARBER

THIS WEEK we're stepping out of the rock'n'roll milieu for a moment to explore some of other music that originated in the United States.

I can't imagine that ragtime albums are produced in any great numbers these days, which places "The Midnight Express: Rags, Boogies, & Train Tunes," by pianist Bob Milne in a category of its own. The 19 songs on this album are nothing but two hands on an acoustic keyboard, but Milne fills in

with a big sound and tunes that range from the familiar to archival material that educates a bit as it entertains. On the familiar end, there are songs like Scott Joplin's famous "Maple Leaf Rag," now transformed into "Maple Leaf Boogie" through Milne's arrangement. On the

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more obscure, but no less entertaining, end of things are tunes like J.P. Johnson's "Eccentricity," a dazzling and lush example of

keyboard art. The archival boogie-woogie is mixed in with a few of Milne's originals, often based on traditional themes, like the title track, "The Midnight Express."

Ragtime is a unique American art form that blended African musical themes with European piano skills, usually with a steady, marching bass line played with one hand while a jazzed-out, syn-

copated melody dominates through the other hand. It's always energetic, enthusiastic music that evokes scenes of days gone by. While the origins of the music may be in the past, Bob Milne is certainly keeping it alive with his own energy and enthusiasm which comes through very nicely on this recording.

If you want to be entertained by some live boogie-woogie, get down to the Studley Theater on the SUNY New Paltz campus tonight at 8, when Bob Milne will be tickling the ivories to a ragtime beat. For more information, call (845) 255-3243.



THERE'S a little bit of rock on this album from Richard Leo Johnson, but mostly it's the guitarist pursuing some dynamic and truly spectacular jazz grooves. Johnson playing solo on his twin-necked acoustic instrument (it's a six-string and 12-string guitar rolled into one)

sounds like a whole band. Even so, he recruited some other great musicians to add to the sound, including Paul McCandless on winds, Andy Reinhardt on accordion, Warren Haynes (yes, that Warren Haynes) on slide guitar, Glen Moore on acoustic bass, Reggie Washington on electric bass, and Matt Wilson on drums, among others.

This recording is so full and rich that it takes a few listens to really appreciate. There are so many nuances in Johnson's performance that, while you'll be awed from the first note, you'll find more and more on repeated

listening. While the jazz explorations and near-classical modalities dominate, the songs make occasional reference to classic rock tunes, including a snatch of Lou Reed in "Sweet Jane Thyme" and a bit of Allman Bros. (with Warren Haynes, of course) on "Freestone Peach."

This is great stuff that can offer a comfortable and artistically dynamic backdrop for a relaxing evening. Highly recommended.

Philip H. Farber is a free-lance writer living in the Hudson Valley. He writes a music column each week for *Preview*.

ARTIST: Bob Milne
ALBUM: "The Midnight Express"
LABEL: Woodland Press
RATING: ★★★★★ (out of 5)

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ARTIST: Richard Leo Johnson
ALBUM: "Language"
LABEL: Blue Note
RATING: ★★★★★ (out of 5)