

# Couple share their love playing ragtime piano

By JIM WINDELL

Ragtime music brought them together and now it sometimes keeps them apart.

But Bob and Linda Milne like it that way. Often when they meet, it's over their own upright piano on which they both joyously toil, playing ragtime music six nights a week. At different times.

Bob and Linda may be the only husband and wife ragtime piano players in the country. Both play the syncopated music of an earlier era at Chuck Muehr's Diggers restaurant, 5955 Grand River, Farmington Hills.

Bob performs Mondays 5:30-10 p.m. and Tuesdays 8:30-10 p.m., Linda works Tuesdays-Fridays from 5:30-8 p.m. and then rushes over to Charley's Crab in Troy to play from 8:30 p.m. till midnight. She works the Diggers' 6-11 p.m. shift Saturday nights and is back at the Crab on Sundays from 6-10 p.m.

Love of ragtime music brought Bob and Linda together.

LINDA EXPLAINED, "I didn't know anyone around Detroit was playing rags, but I went to Charley's Crab with a friend and there was Bob playing ragtime. He was not only playing rags other composers had written, he was playing some he had written. To me that was amazing.

Two years later, the couple was married.

Watching them together, during an interview at Diggers in the middle of Bob's set, the similarities between the two were evident. Both are quiet and somewhat shy. They enjoy talking about ragtime music, of which both are experts. They tend to be wary of personal questions.

Linda is demure and frequently refers questions to her husband. Bob seems diffident but has a funny streak that starts emerge when he loosens up a bit. He is also a genius. That's a word he would never use about himself, however.

Bob Milne not only plays ragtime music in an authentic style, he writes rags. That, too, makes him unique. He is one of the few writers of original rags around today.

"All my life I've been able to make up melodies in my head and remember them. I thought everyone could do that," Milne said. His first rag, "Flypaper Rag," he played for several years before he got around to writing it down on paper.

NOW, HE HAS written some 30 rags, six of which appear on his first album, "Boogie, Blues & Rags," released last

*'I started playing rags before I really knew what they were. I figured if I hit one hand sooner it would be syncopated and more interesting.'*  
— Ragtime pianist Bob Milne

year on the Jim Taylor Presents label. He is a composer of another kind, too.

"I also write art songs called European lieder. This is a distinctive type of vocal composition that came into being in the 18th century," Milne said. He has written 25 art songs around the poetry of Robert Frost and Michigan poet Silliman Elliott, a personal friend.

"You don't publish art songs," he said. "Publishers can't sell them, and besides that no one ever heard of them. I write them and enjoy them and Linda enjoys them."

Milne grew up between Rochester, Mich., and Rochester, N.Y. At age 13 he began playing the French horn and following high school, attended the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y. During his school years there, he played the French horn in the Rochester Philharmonic and later, when he attended the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore, he played the horn in the Baltimore Symphony.

He had been turned off to piano lessons at a young age. "It was all because of a little Schubert piece," Milne said, allowing his wry sense of humor to show. "It was written in minor, but I played it in major. The piano teacher was horrified, and I said I thought it sounded better. She was furious and I lost interest."

THAT INCIDENT should have pointed out to an alert piano teacher that this was no ordinary student she was dealing with. "I've always known how to play a piano. Before I actually played, it was just a matter that I hadn't moved my fingers over the piano keys enough. But, as far back as I can remember, when a piano player plays, I know exactly what notes are being hit."

Milne returned to the piano in college and began playing for sing-alongs. Moving to Detroit, he played at the Dakota Inn and at the Red Garter Saloon. "I fell into playing ragtime," Milne said.

"I started playing rags before I really knew what they were. I figured if I hit one hand sooner, it would be syncopated and more interesting. That's the way I played sing-along."



Bob and Linda Milne both play ragtime piano, at different times, at Diggers in Farmington Hills.

Later, he borrowed a book on ragtime music from the library and taught himself the rest of what he had failed to pick up intuitively on his own. He still hasn't returned that book, he pointed out.

Milne first played for Chuck Muer in Dearborn's Sundog restaurant. Five years ago, after three years at the Sundog, he helped open up Clamdiggers in Farmington Hills.

When Charley's Crab opened in 1976, Milne transferred to the Troy restaurant to share piano duties with Bob Seeley. Both Bob and Linda returned to Clamdiggers in May 1980, bringing their own upright piano with them.

Linda Milne came to ragtime through a slightly different route. Her grandmother was a prominent Detroit church organist and a dominant influence in her life. As a child, Linda was exposed to classical music. She began classical piano at age 5. "I didn't even

know about ragtime as a child," she said.

IN COLLEGE she majored in French with the intention of being a teacher. Hearing ragtime music changed all that.

"I happened to pick up a record produced by Mike Montgomery," she said. Montgomery is a well-known Oakland County piano player and early-sheet-music and piano-roll collector who is an expert on ragtime and other popular music of the early 20th century.

"I heard Scott Joplin piano roll music. I just had to learn the 'Maple Leaf

Rag.' From then on, I played rags." After teaching herself to play rags through sheet music and records, Linda took her first professional job in 1978 at the Dakota Inn. After a year playing the piano there, she played for another year at Little Joe's in Grand Blanc before coming to the Clamdiggers earlier this year.

Her piano style, she said simply, is a ragtime style. "Sometimes when I play a more rhythmic piece, I may get into a stride piano style," Linda said.

Stride piano is the style played by jazz piano musicians in the 20s and was characteristic of men like James P. Johnson and Fats Waller.

## Fourth Street opening 'Ladies at the Alamo'

"Ladies at the Alamo," a comedy by award-winning playwright Paul Zindel, opens at the Fourth Street Playhouse in Royal Oak at 8:30 p.m. Oct. 17 and continues through Nov. 8. Performance times are 8:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 7:30 p.m. Sundays.

"Ladies at the Alamo" examines the behind-the-scenes intrigues and power plays which plague a famous regional theater and its longtime director. It is an explosive look at the five women who work at playing the game of survival in the theater.

Reed Rex of the New York Daily News called it "the most hilarious

female free-for-all since 'The Women.'"

The cast of "Ladies at the Alamo" includes Laurie Johnson of Birmingham, Elaine Boike of Warren, Emily Schreiber of West Bloomfield, Judy Lee of Ferndale and Janice Salisbury of Farmington.

The production is directed by Peggy D. Miller, with Cal Jones assisting. Technical direction is by Darrell Zink and costume design by Mary Job.

Tickets are available at the theater box office, 301 W. Fourth, Royal Oak, or by calling 543-3666. Box office hours are Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays from 6-10 p.m.



Laurie Johnson of Birmingham (left) and Elaine Boike of Warren appear in 'Ladies at the Alamo.'




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