

SWINGING HIGH

from *The News and Observer*, Raleigh, North Carolina

by Owen Cordl

Jelly Roll Morton, Eubie Blake, Jimmy Yancey, Fats Waller, Pinetop Smith and Willie "the lion" Smith have been here and gone, as pianist and writer Art Hodes used to reminisce. But if Butch Thompson has his way, these creators of ragtime, boogie-woogie and stride piano won't be forgotten.

Thompson, who was the house pianist on public radio's "A Prairie Home companion" from 1974 to '86, is one of the few latter-day practitioners of these early jazz styles. Others may occasionally dabble in this bygone era for effect and re-creation, but Thompson is here for the essence and the duration.

Friday night at the ArtsCenter, the pianist opened with a charming solo set and later was joined by Triangle musicians Greg Gelb, Don Gladstone and John Hanks. **The concert was one of those rare times when expectation, realization and surprise converge harmoniously.**

During his solo portion, Thompson ranged from a slow, spare, Yancey-inspired reading of Leroy Carr's "How Long Blues" to Waller's reeling "Handful of Keys," with its difficult offbeat left-hand bass patterns. He showed a more lyrical side of the early piano tradition with Willie "the lion's" "Echo of Spring" and with cornetist and occasional pianist Bix Beiderbecke's impressionistic "In the Dark." He prefaced each piece with comments about and sometimes a demonstration of the composer's piano style (for example, Blake's "wobble bass" and drumlike alternating hands).

Thompson's solos offered creative surprise after surprise. He accompanied with taste and finesse reminiscent of count Basie and Teddy Wilson — perfect timing, dynamics, rhythmic patterns and accents. On "Moonglow" and "Stomping at the Savoy," the pianist switched to clarinet and traded melody lines and counterlines with Gelb, also on clarinet.

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