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Blind Boone: Missouri's Ragtime Pioneer (MISSOURI HERITAGE READERS)

Jack A. Batterson

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Often overlooked by ragtime historians, John William "Blind" Boone had a remarkably successful and influential music career that endured for almost fifty years. *Blind Boone: Missouri's Ragtime Pioneer* provides the first full account of the Missouri-born musician's amazing story of overcoming the odds.

Boone's background and his approach to music contributed to his ability to bridge gaps--gaps between blacks and whites and gaps between popular and classical music. Boone's thousands of performances from 1879 to 1927 brought blacks and whites into the same concert halls as he played a mixture of popular and classical tunes. A pioneer of ragtime music, Boone was the first performer to give the musical style legitimacy by bringing it to the concert stage.

The mulatto child of a former slave and a Union soldier, Boone was born in Miami, Missouri, in 1864 amid the chaos of the Civil War. At six months he was diagnosed with "brain fever." Doctors, believing they were performing a lifesaving procedure, removed Boone's eyes and sewed his eyelids shut.

Despite blindness and poverty, Boone was a fun-loving, cheerful child. Growing up in Warrensburg, Missouri, he played freely with both black and white children, undaunted by racial differences or his own disabilities. He exhibited a keen ear and musical promise early in life; at only five years of age he recruited older boys and formed a band.

Recognizing Boone's talent, the town's prominent citizens sent him to the St. Louis School for the Blind. There he excelled at music and amazed his instructors. However, Boone became increasingly unhappy with the school's treatment of him and he frequently ran away to the tenderloin district of the city, where he first experienced ragtime. As a result of his forays, he was expelled after only two and a half years.

After some harrowing experiences, Boone met John Lange Jr., a benevolent black contractor and philanthropist in Columbia, Missouri. Boone and Lange began a lifelong friendship, which developed from their partnership in the Blind Boone Concert Company. Although the two experienced hardships and racism, fires and train wrecks, Lange's guidance and Boone's talent secured 8,650 concerts in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

Blind Boone: Missouri's Ragtime Pioneer offers an engaging and readable account of the personal and professional life of Blind Boone. This book will appeal to the general reader as well as anyone interested in African American studies or music history.

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