

JOE MILLER

Introduction to Ragtime Guitar

Welcome to the world of ragtime—one of the most joyous forms of music in the world. Since it is also among the most challenging, here are some rhythm studies to help you get started.

The essential ragtime rhythm consists of three against four; that is, a three-note figure is repeated against a steady four-four accompaniment. A simple example is given in Exercise #1. Play the six notes with a steady beat, then wait for two more pulses, and repeat. Count out loud while you play this over and over.

In all the exercises, and in the Ragtime Study, the right-hand index finger (i) plays the third string (G); the middle finger (m) plays the second string (B); and the ring finger (a) plays the first string (E). The thumb plays the three bass strings.

Exercise #2 is an extension of #1. It is the same three notes repeated over and over. It's easy enough to play the exercise—the challenge is in the counting. Count out loud as you play! (Tapping your foot is not good enough!) Once you have mastered this step, you've got the essential ragtime rhythm.

Exercise #3 is based on the same rhythm, but with a typical guitarist's variation: the second note is played with a hammer-on. Again, it's easy to play the three notes over and over, but get into the habit of counting out loud (*one and two and three and four and*), keeping steady time while you practice. Using a metronome is a good idea.

Ragtime Study #1 is the next logical step. Your right-hand thumb plays bass notes on beats one, two, three, and four, while the fingers play a different rhythm, in threes. This is called a polyrhythm—two different rhythms played at the same time. Once you've mastered the first few measures,

you're halfway through the piece, as the same right-hand pattern is used over and over.

In each measure, be sure to finger the chord and hold on to it until the chord changes, otherwise you'll be making far too many moves with the left hand. Holding the chord also results in a smooth, sustained sound.

In the third and final section, the sets of three eighth notes are implied by the rhythm:



That is, the first and second strings ring for one and a half beats over and over.

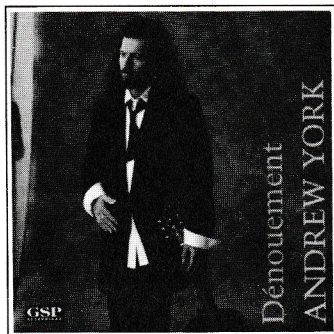
It takes some time for these rhythms to sink in and become easy to play, so take your time and stick with it.

In the last eight measures, the thumb adds to the complexity by rotating among three bass notes instead of just two. This is closer to what a ragtime pianist actually does with the left hand: bass, chord, bass, chord.

Be sure to check out the recordings of Rev. Gary Davis, Dave Van Ronk, Stefan Grossman, Dave Laibman, and Eric Schoenberg to hear what ragtime guitar can sound like. For a straightforward, unhurried version of a real classic piano rag, I recommend listening to Joshua Rifkin's recording of the *Maple Leaf Rag*, composed by Scott Joplin, and published in 1899.

Have fun and good luck!

Joe Miller was the 1987 National Fingerpicking Champion. His latest recording, "Joe Miller, Semi-Traditional Guitar Solos," is available from Rising Sleeves Music, P.O. Box 11181, Berkeley, CA 94701.



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