Ireland’s Voice
From Ohio
Ireland’s Voice From Ohio

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Ernest Roland Ball (July 22, 1878 – May 3, 1927)
In a drugstore on the corner of Wade Park and Russell Avenue in Cleveland during the early part of the 1900s customers would be greeted by the sound of a piano played by someone whose touch on the instrument seemed so magical it could make the customers forget why they came into the drugstore! Often, the song plugger would be joined by the pharmacist-singer. Regulars would often sit through an entire concert during their shopping expedition. The talented and popular pianist was Ernest Roland Ball (who was known as Rollie). He was born in Cleveland in 1878. Rollie began writing songs when he was 15 and he would often slip in some of his own songs with the dime store tunes he was plugging.

Though Rollie’s reputation as one of the finest accompanists of his generation was already established, he also had the reputation of being a bit wild. He seemed unable to settle on anything – one week he’d be playing for the Anderson Dance Academy and the next he’d be at the Lyceum Theater accompanying a visiting artist. Then he’d show up at the Arcade Music Store or playing for services at the Old Stone Church. Worse – sometimes he’d be scheduled for a concert and he wouldn’t even show up! This reputation for drifting from one musical chore to another and earned him the nickname “The Bug.” And so, the turn of the century found Rollie down on his luck with no new career prospects in front of him. His mother talked him into going to New York to meet some song publishers so he could continue composing.

So after graduation from the Cleveland Conservatory of Music, Ball followed his mother’s advice and went to New York. He got a job in a small publishing house in New York where he met a slim, personable James J. Walker. Walker requested that Ball compose some appropriate music for some verses he had written. Ball agreed and the song "Will You Love Me In December As You Do In May" became a hit. However, the team broke up because Mr. Walker became Mayor of New York City.

While working at the Witmark Publishing Company as a song salesman, Rollie’s performing talents soon made him a star salesman. He was promoted to the Vaudeville and Concert Department where he was to get auditions with concert and vaudeville stars to play the latest songs. Soon he
was hired to be the vaudeville performer. He made appearances across the country often performing his own songs. Over the years, Ball wrote over 400 songs including "Dear Little Boy of Mine", "Let The Rest of The World Go By", "A Little Bit of Heaven, Sure They Call It Ireland", and "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling."

His last stage appearance was in Cleveland at the then new B.F. Keith Palace Theatre. His mother sat in a front box seat while Ernest serenaded her with the special song he had written for her, "Mother Machree". He announced, "Somewhere out in this great audience is my mother -- my own Mother Machree. Won't you stand up, pretty mother?" The audience applauded expectantly, but Mrs. Ball was too frightened to stand.

Ball volunteered to play some of his compositions in Santa Ana, California on a Mississippi Flood Relief concert program on May 3, 1927. The crowd was enthusiastic and gave him 8 curtain calls. After the last one, he apologized that he couldn't come out again. With that he went to his dressing room, put his head on his make-up table and died of a heart attack at 48 years old.
Bibliography/Credits

Cover Picture: Historic American Sheet Music, "I'm goin' to fight my way right back to Carolina", Music B-633, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library


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