

PORTRAIT OF EDWARD C. MAY ---

Mr. Music of Miami Beach

By
Lloyd E. Klos

When one recalls the greats of the theater organ, he doesn't fail to name Jesse Crawford, Eddie Dunstedter, Don Baker, Milt Slosser, Ann Leaf, Eddie Baker, Milton Charles, Dick Leibert, Gaylord Carter and Lew White, to cite a very few. All these artists had one thing in common, among others--they played the big theaters, the plush downtown movie palaces which reached their apex during the Twenties and early Thirties.

Every city had organists who attained their local prominence by playing in the downtown houses. Rochester, NY was no exception. The names of Helen Ankner, J. Gordon Baldwin, Hugh Dodge, Grace Drew, Anna Goss, Tom Grierson, Dick Hull, Beatrice Ryan and Harry Sullivan being brought to memory when downtown organists in the Flower City are recalled.

Then, too, each city had what can be called "neighborhood organists"--those musicians who played the smaller instruments of the theaters in outlying districts. Rochester had many of these musicians also. There were approximately 20 small theaters having organs, and because of the Eastman School of Music's Motion Picture Organ course in the 1920's, there was an unending supply of musicians of varying caliber to satisfy the demand.

Most prominent of the Rochester neighborhood organists was Edward C. May. In fact, his popularity rivaled that of the organists in the downtown houses.

He was born in Rochester in 1900 and attended public schools and West High School. Music and show business became a part of his early life, and he says, "I did a bit of tap dancing when, as a high school lad, I traveled a couple summers with a sawdust show, playing carnivals and fairs. I sang "Margie", carried a cane, wore a straw hat, and did a few steps. It was called "Musical Comedy", a very loose use of the term."

His first music teachers were Hermina Stohl, Janette Fuller, and Johan Reichart. He studied at the Eastman School under Harold Gleason, Arthur See, and H. Wilson, though not finishing the prescribed course there. While at the Eastman, Mr. May accepted a position proffered by the area Wurlitzer representative which entailed opening new organs. He recalls one occasion:

"While engaged to open a 3/18 Wurlitzer in an upstate theater, the manager couldn't seem to make out proper schedules. Therefore, he frequently asked that I lengthen my solo to 21 minutes instead of playing the regular 12 minutes. This I would not do, because this method of playing to hold an audience was a sure way to lose it. He got so angry that he cried: "I'll bring a curse on you--you shall be a theater manager before you die." He got his wish later on, and I soon learned why he thought this was good punishment for me. I griped about 9 minutes of playing time, but managers could work from 9 AM until midnight, and no one seemed to care."

Following his Eastman sojourn, Mr. May went to New York City for study under Dr. Arturo Contoni, Ann Stein and J. J. Fischer.

Returning to Rochester, he served as consultant for the Kohl Organ Co., a Rochester concern. In this capacity, he played opening recitals in churches and theaters throughout New York State. Serving as instructor for the Rochester Board of Education, he taught piano and music foundation at Jefferson High School. Another project involved organi-

zing and training an all-girl orchestra at Nazareth College--this in the days before Phil Spitalny and Evelyn with her "Magic Violin".

In 1921, he was a tour organist in the eastern United States, and in 1924, Mr. May joined the Schine Theater organization, serving in various capacities for about five years. Some of the cities in which he performed during this time included Watertown NY, at the Olympic Theater (3M Wurl); Batavia, NY at the Bellinger Theater (2/4 Wurl); Geneva, NY at the Geneva Theater (2/7 Wurl); and in Buffalo, NY where he played several--Shea's Roosevelt (4/18 Marr & Colton); Shea's Elmwood (3/11 Wurl); Lafayette (3/15 Wurl); and Loew's State (3M Moller). His engagements in these theaters were usually from one to four weeks apiece.

The theaters in the Schine group in Rochester in this period, with their dates of opening, were the Dixie in 1923; Grand, 1923; Cameo, 1926; Riviera, 1926; State, 1927; Liberty, 1927; and Lake, 1928. The Thurston, 1926; Madison, 1927; and Monroe, 1928, were added later. All these theaters had organs--Wurlitzers, Marr & Coltons or Kohls.

The period which followed was one of managerial switching for Eddie May. In the December 9, 1928 issue of the Rochester Democrat & Chronicle, the

(Continued On Page 22)



Eddie May at the Riviera organ, October 1931. Console was done over to make it more spectacular when spot-light was directed on it. Organ was junked during the war as were most Schine organs. - E. May Col.

following item appeared on the theater page: "Edward C. May, an organist of the Schine circuit, has been engaged to play at the Liberty Theater at Driving Park and Dewey Avenues. Mr. May has played a number of theaters as a feature at the installation of new organs, having introduced in Rochester in the last few years, those at the State, Liberty, Grand, Staley, Empress and Arnett Theaters. He also is known for his solo acts in combination with the vitaphone, and is said to have introduced song slides in Rochester. Mr. May maintains a studio of the piano and organ".

In 1929, as manager of the Liberty Theater, he was featured as organist, playing between shows, and also over WHEC. He is one of very few theater organists who played over all radio stations in Rochester. His star was rising.

On February 1, 1930, when at the tender age of 29, he was named manager of the 1600-seat Riviera, the largest neighborhood house in the city. At that time, according to C. C. Young, Schine District Manager, Edward C. May was one of the youngest managers in the organization. He held this post for a

short time before he was switched back to the Liberty as manager, this time holding the job for a year. While there, Mr. May conceived the idea of mounting the Liberty's organ console on casters so that it could be moved about. An old newspaper clipping gives the details:

"For the past two weeks, workmen have been busy in the pit and on the stage of the Liberty Theater preparing for the first public showing of a moveable organ console (in Rochester). The result of this work was displayed last week with Arthur C. Kohl, co-designer and Edward C. May at the console.

"By means of a huge cable system, the console now may be moved to any part of the stage or completely off stage as desired, and if the organist so wishes, the organ may be played while moving.

"A workman is said to have walked five miles in the pit of the theater, laying each connecting wire in the cable. There are 2100 various stops, combinations, keys etc., and there had to be 2100 individual wires. Each of the wires had to be run out to insure its being connected right, and the man doing the testing had to be relieved

at short intervals, because over a short period of time, his body would become heavily charged with electricity, and would effect the accuracy of the "ringing". This portable console was reported to be the first of its kind outside of New York City.

On May 14, 1931, it was announced by Louis W. Schine that Edward C. May was returning to the Riviera as manager. In announcing the change, Mr. Schine stated that "It was purely in the interest of ensuring the public well-diversified entertainment". All Schine managers were given considerable leeway by the home office, and as a consequence, each was given an opportunity to develop his showmanship ability. A change of management periodically thereby insured a greater diversity in entertainment for the public.

The Riviera had a 3/11 unified and duplexed Marr & Colton. The pipes spoke from 2 chambers flanking the proscenium arch, and the console was situated at the right of the stage on a short elevator. Eddie instituted a policy of an organ recital prior to each program at the theater. Radio facilities were installed, and he was heard daily over WHEC at noon and at 3 PM. On Tuesday and Thursday evenings, he broadcast dinner music at 6. His popularity greatly increased through the infant medium of radio.

Of the Riviera organ, Eddie remembers in a humorous vein. "I used to get seasick every time I ran the console up to stage level. About half way up, the silly thing would go into a shimmy, not enough to be noticed by the audience, but nevertheless I never quite knew if and when I'd go sailing out into the third row. It never happened." The writer is given to wonder if the console were merely trying to emulate the shimmy queen, Gilda Gray, who was popular at this time.

When installed in 1926, the console was finished in a floral design, but rather drab. Later, a coat of ivory paint with black trim was applied so as to provide a more sparkling appearance when rising from the pit into the spotlight.

Even though his expanded activities at the theater kept him busy, he found time to serve as organist and choir-master for the 50-voice East Side Presbyterian Church choir. In this capacity, he gave concerts over WHEC frequently. One of Mr. May's good friends, Gerry Coyle, who also served as assistant manager with Ed at the Riviera and Liberty, displayed a couple scrapbooks to the writer which had a wealth of memorabilia about the old days. In one was a note which had been removed from the East Side Church bulletin board which read: "Dear Choir; Fine



Eddie May at the 3/11 Marr & Colton in the Riviera Theater, prior to 1931. Console is in original decorative scheme. E. May Collection

(Continued On Next Page)



"Mr. Music of Miami Beach" poses with notables in his home near one of his organs. Left to Right: Paul Finger, Florida representative for Rodgers Organ Co.; Eddie May; Fred Feibel, former NY City theater organist now living in Florida; and Rodgers Jenkins, official of the Rodgers Organ Co.

Work this morning! Please remain just a moment after service for several very important announcements. Thanks, E. C. May". Also organized at the church was a junior choir of youngsters. Clay Cornell, in heartening back to the good old days, told the writer that ideas were tried out to induce the children to keep coming to rehearsals. Pennies and nickels were the rewards for faithful attendance.

Gerry Coyle was of much assistance to the writer in the preparation of this feature. He mentioned the rakish automobiles which our hero sported in those days. Ed had a tan Hudson, and painted the underside of the fenders a brilliant orange which created a colorful appearance, to say the least. A second car was a Ford with over size General Jumbo tires.

It was practically a necessity to have two cars, as those days were the era of "bicycle films". That is, if two theaters were showing the same picture, schedules had to be co-ordinated so as soon as showing of the film was completed in one house, someone had to rush it from the projection booth, hop into a waiting car, and drive madly to the second theater. In rare instances, inclement weather, auto breakdown or other causes would prevent showing of the picture in the second theater. A slide to that effect would be flashed upon the screen which would result in a few irate patrons storming to the box office to demand their money back.

One day in 1931 or 1932, a trampish-

looking "Knight of the Road" walked into the Riviera lobby. He told his sad tale of woe to assistant manager Coyle; His name was Halburton Clough, aged 28; he had just lost his bus driver's job; he had no money; he was down, but not quite out. He just wanted to get warm. When he saw the organ console, he asked if he could play, and Gerry motioned him to the console. And how that fellow did play! Eddie May, upon arriving at the theater, heard Clough's technique, and promptly hired him as substitute organist at the Riviera and Liberty, a job he held for about six months.

In February 1933, Howard G. Carrol, Divisional Director for Schine Enterprises in Western New York, announced that, owing to the popularity of the organ programs at the Riviera, that type of entertainment was being expanded to other Rochester Schine Theaters. Mr. May was selected for a rotating schedule which featured him at the Riviera each Sunday, Monday and Tuesday; the Liberty 2/6 Wurlitzer every Wednesday and Thursday; the Dixie 2/5 Kilgen every Friday; and the State 2/6 Wurlitzer every Saturday. The organs were overhauled for this series, and according to faded clippings, the first program was featured by Schubert's "March Militaire" and a song slide novelty "The Sad Caballero".

The writer vividly remembers Mr. May's tenure as manager of the Riviera. Possessed of a very friendly, breezy personality, he often would position him-

self in the outer lobby of the theater and announce the coming events to the persons coming in. One December, for example, his spiel a-la circus barker went thusly: "Everybody get your tickets now for the big New Year's Eve midnight stage and screen show." He greeted everyone, knowing many of the patrons by name. Those were the days when most managers did not confine themselves to the privacy of their offices. Mr. May promoted such special features as Bank Night, China Night, Bango and frequent stage shows using both amateur and professional talent.

For Bank Night, \$25 or \$50 were put up, and if there were no holders of the lucky ticket stub, Bank Night the following week would be worth \$25 or \$50 more. China Night consisted of presenting each lady patron with an item of chinaware. The only trouble with this was that quite frequently throughout the evening, some lady, completely absorbed in the movie, would forget the china piece on her lap, and it would drop onto the floor. Some wise-acre invariably would yell "China!". Many a female patron was able to collect an ivory and gold set of very attractive china through faithful attendance on China Nights, all for 20¢ admission. The Bango game was just a take-off on bingo. There weren't big prizes, but everyone had a barrel of fun. After all, this was the "ain't-we-got-fun" era which preceded the "I-dare-you-to-entertain-me" age, the latter still very much in vogue.

Mr. May's work at East Side Presbyterian Church continued through this period. On Easter Sunday in 1934, he performed a Prelude for Organ which he wrote and dedicated to the memory of his Father, and named "This Easter Day". On February 10, 1935, which was designated Race Relation Sunday, he played a special organ program of Negro Spirituals.

As if his theater and church work weren't enough, Mr. May in May 1936 with the help of his wife, Gwen; Clate Cornell; Al Sigl; and Arthur See, organized the Rochester Community Choir. The first rehearsal drew 40 people. Through publicity over radio and in the press, coupled with broadcasts and personal appearances, interest in this group grew until membership totaled 1,500 in two years.

The Community Choir was a unique organization, as far as volunteer groups went. It remained solvent during its entire existence, no dues being paid by members. Income was derived from sponsored radio broadcasts. Its music library was very extensive. Many of the most prominent names in the city were solidly behind the venture. Among them were City Manager, Harold W. Baker; beloved Times-Union newscaster, Al Sigl; Former Mayor, Charles

(Continued On Page 24)

MR. MUSIC

(Continued From Page 22)

Stanton; and Dr. Howard Hanson, Director of the Eastman School of Music. Rehearsals were held in the Rochester Gas & Electric Corp. auditorium which was donated by that company as a public service. In short, the choir members got together for one purpose--to enjoy singing for others.

In early 1938, Mr. May was named manager of the Dixie Theater which had the only Kilgen theater organ in Rochester, a 2/5 instrument. He didn't have this job long, because on June 13, he accepted the job as manager of a Schine Theater in Maysville, Kentucky. He had considered very heavily remaining in Rochester, so that he might have continued his theater work and directorship of the Community Choir. However, he reached the conclusion that the position offered meant an advancement in his professional work which he couldn't afford to pass up.

Three months after accepting the new post in Maysville, Mr. May organized plans for a Community Choir there. By June 1939, he had, with WPA assistance, established Community Choirs in Pineville and Georgetown, Georgia; Tazwell, Burleigh and Cromwell, Tennessee; and in Maysville, Middleboro, Paris, Covington and Corbin, Kentucky. Mrs. May, according to her husband, did much of the organizational work. He also found time to direct the Maysville Civic Band.

According to Eddie, his most serious music and organ study came at the age of 40 with Bruce Davis, head of the organ department at Oberlin University.

He describes an amusing experience which occurred at this time. "While engaged as guest organist in a Kentucky Theater, I was standing at the head of the aisle, talking to the manager during a matinee. During a very quiet part of the picture, we heard a continuous buzzing which seemed to get louder. We figured it must be a time bomb, and the manager was just about to call for House lights and empty the theater, when a guy, sitting in an end seat on the aisle, pulled the plug of his electric razor from a floor outlet. 'Nuf said."

Since leaving Rochester, Eddie May had managed and played in theaters in Ohio, Kentucky, Virginia, Pennsylvania and California. Thus, he joined such native Rochesterians as radio announcers Jimmie Wallington and Bill Stern; TV and Radio Writer Dick Chevelait; Band leader, Cab Calloway; and TV and recording executive, Mitch Miller in the "Local-Boy-Makes-Good" class. There was hardly a musical endeavor with which Eddie May was not connected. He directed orchestras, bands, minstrel shows, even did an impersonation of

Groucho Marx which was a huge success.

In 1944, another big break came to Mr. May. He was sent by Myer Schine to the Roney Plaza Hotel in Miami Beach, the first of several assignments in plush hotels and clubs in the area. At the Roney, he was featured at the organ in the Ocean Front Lounge. He so thoroughly entered the musical field in Miami, that he justly deserves the title of "Mr. Music of Miami Beach" which was accorded him in 1953. He has continued his church work, has appeared in theaters. Two incidents relative to his Miami theater experience are related here by Eddie:

"There was a time in a Miami Theater when an usherette in the balcony accidentally pushed a man's hat off the front rail. As it started to fall, she lunged to grab it--yep, she went you-know-what over applecart, landed on her back in the aisle on the main floor. Breathless for a few minutes, but after seeing the house doctor, she went back and finished out the night on the job. Either the carpets are real thick, or the babes are bouncy in Miami!"

"A very pretty girl, about 18 years old, was one of my most ardent fans at a radio show in the Lincoln Theater, Miami Beach. One night, when the show was over, she rushed to the stage and told me she had just arrived from Rochester, and I was the first person she had wanted to see. This made me feel very important. Such fame! I hadn't been in Rochester for years, and this youngster remembered me! She mentioned the Riviera and my teaching in Rochester. Then came the big blow. She told me her grandmother studied organ with me, and wanted to be remembered to me! It was years before I'd speak to anyone under 40 after that experience!"

Mr. May's church work has included organist's duties at Biscayne Boulevard Lutheran Church where he dedicated the newly-installed organ in 1954. He has played the Lincoln Theater Lounge and the Clover Club. He has performed at graduation recitals at Dade County Auditorium. At the Mahi Shrine Temple, he has played the 4M Skinner. Interspersed with engagements at Miami hotels such as the MacFadden-Deauville, he has been on tour. One of these tours took him to his home town in August, 1951 for an engagement at Larry's Lounge. He has returned to the city several times to visit friends and relatives.

He lives in a beautiful dream home in Miami with 4-car garage and Rolls Royce, and gardens of unsurpassed beauty. In his home organ instruction studios are four electronics--2 Hammonds, a Rodgers 2/9 all-transistor unified theater organ, and a Rodgers 3/22 all-transistor straight concert organ. He says, "One of the reasons we

purchased this home was that it afforded ideal accommodations for a good-sized pipe organ. However, the Rodgers organs, unlike any other electronic, have an ensemble build-up, just like a pipe organ. The tonality of each rank has its own generator which means that added ranks actually add individual tonalities, each note having its own power plant. They are truly great instruments". Should Mr. May ever decide to install a theater pipe organ, he can utilize the services of Miami ATOE member and friend, John Steele, who can dismantle and rebuild a good-sized pipe organ.

Mr. May is a member of AGO, MTNA, FMTA, MMTA and the AFM. In the exchange of correspondence during the preparation of this feature, he evinced an interest in joining the ATOE. The writer promptly steered him to the proper authority, so by the time this article appears, the name of Edward C. May should grace the ATOE roster.

In regards to his past, and his philosophy on his endeavors, he says, "I never liked managing theaters--I got back into full-time organ work at every opportunity. I have always had theater, radio, church and concert organ work throughout my years, in addition to the managing of theaters. For the past 15 years, I have done, and will continue to do, full-time organ work. As during recent years, I will do national conventions, expositions, trade shows, sports events, TV, radio, church, recitals, as well as organ instruction work."

Then, in retrospect over the recent death of his wife, he says, "Life seems to have a way of equalizing everything--if one doesn't have financial problems, there are always other heartaches which more than make up for other good fortune".

Thus, Rochester-born Edward C. May has come a long way since the days when he flicked the tabs and punched the combination pistons on the Riviera organ. Someone has said that anyone who leaves Rochester does himself more good than had he stayed. This could be true, as the story of Mr. May indicates.

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