

MILDRED ALEXANDER
BRINGS GLAMOR AND
SPIKED-HEEL PEDALLING
TO ENTERTAIN
CONVENTIONEERS

One criticism of the ATOE conventions is that the organists featured are usually males, often hoary males from the silent flicker era. This concept began to break down with the occasional appearance of Dottie MacClain followed by full-blown concerts at the Buffalo and Chicago conventions by Pearl White. This year the male monopoly was shattered for all time by the appearance of Millie Alexander, the likes of whom there never was another.

Millie is a shy, brash, brilliant, self-destructive, bold, retiring Southern Belle -- yes, a compendium of contradictions which tend to make her all the more loveable.

Her concert was scheduled for a coveted spot, the Saturday night 8:00 PM place. The instrument was the 3-13 Wurlitzer in the gaudiest of settings, the super-colorful Oriental theatre. The house is the epitome of ornateness, with murals right out of the Arabian Nights, acres of hieroglyphics on the walls, plaster dragons guarding the entrance to the balcony, lavish splashes of gold paint, red paint, blue paint -- the very epitome of the age of fast-vanishing cinema palaces "where bored housewives could escape the doldrums of the depression years for a whole afternoon for only four bits" to quote an eminent authority on the golden era of movie palaces, Ben Hall.

Speaking of Ben Hall, he made the scene to introduce our gal Millie. The "sage of the silent cinema" told about her early years as a struggling musician, the studies with Bob VanCamp (currently playing the Atlanta Fox 4-43 Moeller), her overcoming of senior organist Dick Liebert's fears that no woman could handle the 4-58 behemoth in the Radio City Music Hall, New York, and her current assignment as "teacher by mail" and concert artist for an unnamed brand of electric organ. Ben mentioned that Millie was quivering in the pit, even as he expounded her many virtues.

The fold-leafed console arose on its hydraulic lift as Millie gave out with a full-blown "Sound of Music" medley. As the bright spotlight hit the baby blue formal a burst of applause greeted Millie and later she said at that moment she knew she was among friends.

It's most difficult to translate Millie's "mint julep and magnolia" brogue in terms of the English alphabet but it went something like, "Ahm sew playad tew



Mildred Alexander practicing at the Oriental Wurlitzer. (Del Matthews Photo)

playay fo' yew'awl." Then she went into a dreamy "Claire d'Lune" which naturally featured the Tibias.

At this point something should be said about the instrument. It was installed when the theatre was opened in December, 1927, and continued as a real sweet style 235 very special (it has a Posthorn) until a lad named Dennis Hedberg came along. Dennis, obviously the busiest organ maintenance man in Portland, helped with the restoration of the organ and applied the "Hedberg" treatment; to obtain greater volume he jacked up the pressure and opened up the boots of pipes, thus sacrificing refinement for greater volume. Although the practice makes veteran organ men shudder, Dennis has somehow managed to make it come off with good results in the Oriental. The loss of refinement is not obvious. Dennis is fully aware of the controversy aroused by his theories, made the more acute because once "Hedberged," an organ must remain that way. Lips on the metal pipes are often cut up to take full advantage of the effects of greater pressure. "I'm controversial," grins Dennis. But back to Millie.

After a sprightly "Serenata" she went into a medley of typical theatre organ treatments, "Diane" (for Jesse Crawford fans), "The Perfect Song" (for Amos 'n Andy fans), "Open Your Eyes" (for Dunstedter fans) and a rousing "Strike Up the Band" (for Millie Alexander fans). Next came a tune which Millie has taken a fancy to, the work of an amateur song writer named Stu Green, his twice-recorded "Once in a Dream." It must have

come off to the writer's satisfaction because during the soft passages one could hear him blubbing softly somewhere in the audience.

Space doesn't permit comment on all of Miss Alexander's selections but the highlights are memorable ones. Her "Cherokee" was much more British (written by Briton Ray Noble) than wild Indian and much more organ jazz than either. Just about all of the concert artists took a flyer with that example of Freudian frigidity, the "Girl from Ipanema," and Millie did her part to uphold the myth of the Miss who just isn't interested, no matter how attractive her advertising may be. "Begin the Beguine" and part of "September Song" were given a tutti bolero treatment which brought on some spontaneous applause. Millie had a few words to say about what she called "kid music" which she feels is getting prettier. As examples she played sweet versions of the Beatles' "Michelle" and "Spanish Eyes." Luckily, the Wurlitzer is not equipped with a "wild dog" guitar stop key so she made her point.

Millie's "baroque" effort fell completely flat -- so far as being truly baroque goes. It was much too sweet, melodic and plain pretty, with little relationship to the raspy reeds and screaming mixtures required for true baroque "beauty." As she presented the music, it was well received. One can't but wonder if it would be the same if her aim and facilities had been nearer the real "Flentropery."

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theatre organ - bombarde

MILLIE ALEXANDER

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The big feature medley was the same as presented last year at the LA Chapter Wiltern theatre concert (which Millie approached with her fingers crossed) and we can't help wondering if there isn't a personal message to her husband, Bill Appleton, ill-concealed in its titles: "Bill", "The Second Time Around" and "Lover". This time she managed to perform that outrageous rightfoot pedal melody during "Lover" without losing a shoe as she did during her Wiltern performance. In fact, the subject of shoes brings up the finesse in the lady's pedal technique. Millie doesn't wear army shoes while playing, she somehow manages intricate heel and toe passages while wearing shoes with spiked heels! And small wonder that all the ATOE wolves were seated close to the console; Millie's fast-peddaling chorus girltype gams were a show all by themselves.



Mildred Alexander plays her opener as the organ rises out of the pit.
(Del Matthews Photo)

Millie's closer was one of her favorites and one which has become associated with her in recent years, "Never Leave Me" from Gordon Jenkin's paeon to Gotham, "Manhattan Tower." It's a massive, sweeping theme but with all the tenderness of young love. Millie made it come alive so that we all shared that high-up view of Manhattan with someone very dear. During the final mighty passage Millie hit the "down" button and as the console slithered pitward a great burst of applause filled the theatre. Millie came back up for a "St. Louis Blues" encore during which she used the ricky-tick piano in the pit (it plays from the console). That boogie-woogie pedal part was something to ogle!

Despite Millie's forebodings of disaster and public self-criticism (e.g. "Ah bleyew the bree-idge" (translation: I blew the bridge), she had once again proved beyond all doubt that she could still cut the mustard on pipes.

summer 1966

SCOTT GILLESPIE SHINES AT THE ORIENTAL WURLITZER

Double feature movie programs are the normal thing in theatres. However, double feature organ programs are unusual. The Oregon Chapter of ATOE introduced several innovations at the 1966 National Meeting, twin bill organ programs being one of these.

Following Mildred Alexander's top-flight program, Scott Gillespie took over the Oriental console to perform a wonderfully constructed program. Gillespie, relatively a newcomer, produced a program that proved to be much more than a pleasant surprise.

Although the listeners had been in-

formed that Scott was a former student of the late great "Gus" Farney, no one expected this young man to put on a performance equal to the finest in theatre organ style. Gus Farney had an apt student and saw to it that Gillespie would be able to use his talents in combining the 1920's style with the modern approach in a blend that is fresh but still retains the flavor of the good old days.

His introduction was "Sound of Music" tastefully done and more than well received. Each number played increased

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Scott Gillespie Pauses Between Numbers during his Oriental Concert.
(Del Matthews Photo)