

Nostalgia in a Follow-up . . .

"HOW A WAYWARD YOUNG GENIUS CRASHED THE SOUND BARRIER INTO UTTER OBLIVION"

An Impudent Autobiographical Sketch

by RANDY SAULS

If you ever felt upon entering a strange room that you've been there before you can understand how it was to open last October's issue of *Theatre Organ - Bombarde*, the one with that nice young man, Billy Nalle at the Atlanta Fox console, on the cover. The "jolt" was the picture on page 5, showing a very familiar proscenium arch behind a white-washed Robert Morton console. I had stared at that same arch many hours while playing the same organ! Here was a warm story about an old friend!



This photo of Donald May and a console restored from the ravages of 13 years weathering in an alley, stirred some almost forgotten memories in its player of the silent movie era.

The title of that interesting and well-written article, *It's Doomed to Silence*, is the story of my silent movie career! It was my adolescent good fortune to select as a profession the dubious art of accompanying silent movies on the pipe organ for future livelihood. The innate sense of timing which has prevailed all through a lifetime triggered me into this just about the time Al Jolson (may he rest in pieces) set up a graceless series of yowls for his southern "mammy" when everyone knew he'd seldom ventured South of the Mason and Dixon line.

The first paragraph of that article, though, really rang a bell when the name *Roy Gimbel* was mentioned. Roy was the tuner of the Robert Mortons in the Saenger chain of theatres which covered all of Louisiana and Mississippi with houses in Texas, Mobile, Alabama and

Pensacola, Florida. The Columbia theatre in Baton Rouge, with the same Robert Morton now before me in the photo, managed to have a tuning twice during my stay of nearly two years and it was from Roy that I first learned what the term *celeste* in pipe organ terminology meant. This seven ranker (if I remember correctly) was the first I ever heard in the agonizing throes of being tuned. Holding keys for Roy was an education to an eighteen-year-old who had visions of one day replacing Jesse Crawford at the New York Paramount.

How could it have happened that a musically ill-equipped student of Louisiana State University came to perform on the instrument which was the subject of such an interesting article? In deference to the admirable young fellows who rescued that tired console from the unseemly fate of languishing in a weather-worn alley we hope you'll harbor a bit of curiosity.

After two years at Mississippi A & M College (now Mississippi State) in Starkville, Mississippi, where the local First Presbyterian Church was kind enough to offer practice time on their four rank Moller, and where doubling at the local cinema on an off-brand *Photoplayer* (one rank of wheezy, hoarse "Tibias," a score of temperamental traps and an out-of-tune piano) was responsible for a rather poor academic showing, my migration to Louisiana State University was understandable. The town of Baton Rouge had two theatres with pipe organs. The Louisiana theatre, a small "B" picture house, was down Third Street just a short country block from the imposing Columbia theatre (now the Paramount). It was neither guts nor courage but sheer stupidity that prompted my asking the manager of the lesser house for a job! When an audition was granted their little six rank Robert Morton seemed larger than Wanamaker's behemoth in Philadelphia! The manager, however, had already been briefed (by the young hopeful—who else?) that everybody up in Mississippi said he sounded "just like Jesse Crawford." It's only a gentlemanly gesture to the two ladies who were already playing at the Columbia and Louisiana theatres to add that back in Mississippi I had worn out several sets of Jesse Crawford "Orthophonic" Victor records just listening—

and even though it was a poor imitation, the listener could at least tell what was being attempted! Luckily, I was hired—although without pay!

When my big opening night came it was noteworthy. I was permitted to play after the lady organist got off for the night, around 10 p.m. My first "trick of showmanship" was to play the *Stars and Stripes Forever* when the cowboys were chasing the bandits. The tone deaf (or I'd never have had the job) manager mistook the patriotic applause of the audience for recognition of genius—so I was promoted. Pay started.

Yes, the Louisiana was still doing "silents" but the "big house" down the street had already begun to talk. Whenever one of the two lady organists wanted a day off it was my thrill to play the silent newsreels and *Felix the Cat* cartoons at the Columbia. The other organists had warned me, though, that the "big organ" would "get away" from me if I wasn't careful. You see, it was divided into two chambers, one on each side of the theatre with two swell shoes plus crescendo pedal! To elaborate on the motherly kindness of the two regular organists, Janet Milroy and Josephine Byrd, would make a sentimental "thing" of my formal initiation into theatre organ playing. However, both saw the handwriting on the wall even if I didn't, and silently faded away into the sunset as their salaries were lowered while that ignorant clown from Mississippi stayed on as long as they let him! They paid enough to complete my current term in college, though! Those Crawford glissandos educated me! I was a one-man ATOE long before the club was organized!

Then there was my visit to the Saenger theatre in New Orleans where that huge Robert Morton was played regularly by John Hammond, an excellent musician and teacher of many of the organists in the smaller houses of the Saenger chain. An interview with him was most encouraging. Any real theatre organ enthusiast will understand my remembering to this day his exact pronouncement:

"Many of us hope that the talking pictures are just a fad. If the musicians return to the orchestra pits and the organists to their consoles, contact me

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and I'll make the finest organist in the United States out of you. But if these talkies are here to stay, all I can say is that it's nice to have made your acquaintance."

He was most generous in his comment and I've often wondered if he'd be disappointed in how I've followed through!

It became evident back in Baton Rouge that Lee DeForest* had lowered the boom and there wasn't much point in becoming "the greatest." The Louisiana theatre began using the "Non-Sync," records played on a double turntable. Following a cue sheet, you could fade from one theme into another and brain-wash the poor public into accepting recorded music in place of the sad little Robert Morton so noble in its silence, enduring with all dignity its inescapable fate. The Columbia theatre, though, still had silent newsreels and *Felix the Cat*. The "toy-counter," a term unheard in those days, was on hand to follow noisily the pratfalls on the screen. Huey Long was just beginning his penchant for publicity and whenever he appeared in the newsreels, that clever young organist would always burst forth into the *Toreador Song* from *Carmen*. Although this saucy comment sailed over the heads of the "early settlers," there were enough sophisticated college kids who had heard some opera who "got it" and knew I was chiding the senator (only a state senator at that time—he hadn't yet even become Louisiana's most famous governor) for "throwing the bull."

Subsequent experience as presentation soloist before theatre audiences throughout the south taught me the need for a "big splash" at the finish of the act. Whatever was required, whether an American flag or the ear-splitting crash of a huge finale chord to whack the listener, you had to do something to make him realize he's glad that you've finished. My "splash" is the accompanying photograph at the console of the Columbia theatre Robert Morton recently-revived console. Taken in 1929 by Ewing, Studios of Baton Rouge, it still carries a stamp on the back: *Should the picture discolor within five years return it with the negative and we will replace it free of charge.* But, it's still perfect.

The last thirty-eight years have not been in vain then, if you can see the humor in this priceless tintype. With those sparkling teeth (and I still have all of 'em), that wild Spanish shawl which I snatched from my sister's evening wardrobe and those fancy English formal trousers, you can't help wondering if they still have the same old curtain alongside

*Inventor of the vacuum tube which made "talkies" possible.



Randy Sauls at the Baton Rouge Paramount (then Columbia) theatre Robert Morton console in 1928. The little console suffered degradation for many years and

then made an almost miraculous comeback, thanks to ATOers Bob Courtney and Don May. Randy has done much better than his former mount.

the antique gold proscenium. That pompous old curtain closed on producer George Wince's road shows of *Rio Rita*, *The Vagabond King*, *The Desert Song*, and *The Student Prince*, never forgetting the memorable *Blackouts of 1929*.

Fond recollections of this sort should



Randy Sauls today. Looking back, he doesn't have a very high opinion of his silent era artistry. But he's doing all right now, playing concerts for Hammond in the Hollywood area. He's currently playing a model H-100.

end on a happy, humorous tone but this isn't simple when it actually brings pity and sadness for the current crop of mop-haired, tight-trousered, bathless youngsters who will never know the good old "Show Business" as it once was. Phyllis Diller, who has such a mountain of talent for timeliness, was once heard to ask, "If this is September whatever happened to July and August?" Phyllis actually got into show business after that spangled curtain had closed forever! So, perhaps there's still hope for the rest of us.

Editor's Note: In view of Randy Sauls' self-deprecatory talents it should be stated that the facts do not bear him out. The "ignorant clown from Mississippi," as he describes himself, in the interim has become well-known as a raconteur, author, performer (organ, that is), lecturer, wit and publisher of the "Thinking Organist" series of instructor's publications. His "Introduction to Modern Harmony" (1961) is already in its third printing. His frequent articles published by "The Hammond Times" indicate that either Randy has learned a lot in the past 30 years or he never was as musically pusillanimous as he claims. But no matter; his remembrances of the "good old days" could be improved only if told in the gentle "Suth'n" accents of his Mississippi beginnings.