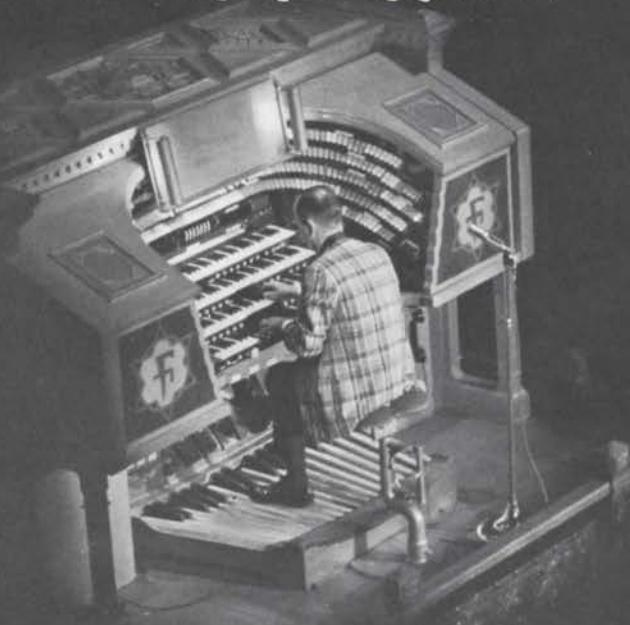


BOB VAN CAMP



PILOT

of the

MIGHTY MO

by Ray Brubacher

Photos by the Author

THEATRE ORGAN has carried in a past issue, a vivid and exciting description of the forty-two rank Moller organ in the Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Georgia. Concert Recordings of Lynwood, California, is now in the process of releasing the first recording of this unique and exciting instrument, played by its commander-in-chief Bob Van Camp. During a visit to Atlanta this past October, I was indeed fortunate to be able to interview Mr. Van Camp and now would like to give THEATRE ORGAN BOMBARDE readers a glimpse into the present life of this rarity of rarities — a working theatre organist.

Born in Scranton, Pennsylvania, Bob as is the usual custom, was subjected to piano lessons at an early age, and it did not take him long to become fascinated with that unusual instrument, the theatre organ. If Bob was not in school, he could usually be located at the Poli Theatre, front and center, entranced with the artistry of Lena Webster or other artistes who performed on the Poli's organ.

As a freshman in high school, Bob soon took his first professional organ-playing engagement at a German church in Scranton. Bob took on the job with a rather uneasy feeling because for one thing, he did not know how to play and for another thing, could neither speak nor understand German. However, the four-and-one-half rank theatre-style instrument offered ample opportunity to jam in what Bob describes as "early German square." This position lasted through the rest of his tenure in high school, although there is reason to wonder what the clergy of the church must have thought of the mixture of Bach and boogie!

Upon entering Duke University at Durham, North Carolina, Bob soon discovered that the campus student theatre had a three-manual, ten-rank Wurlitzer which it had purchased from a Washington, D. C., theatre. (*Ed. Note:* Presumably the Avenue Grand Theatre, Washington, D. C.) The many years of jamming with the Germans had paid off; he was appointed the theatre's organist. The university soon took steps to correct his lacking theatre organ education by sending Bob to New York for three one-week periods to study with Lew White. It may be of interest to know that Bob studied and practiced on a three-manual, ten-rank Wurlitzer in the New York studio of that firm. White was then at the Center Theatre playing the four-manual, thirty-four-rank Wurlitzer.

At this point, Bob got into radio work at the suggestion of the "King of Jazz," Paul Whiteman. As Bob tells it, all network radio at that time was live, and Whiteman's network program for one week originated from the Duke University Theatre. Following the first broadcast, Mr. Whiteman was most generous with his encores — in fact too generous, and the feature film that followed the stage show broadcast went on so late that there was not time enough to complete the showing of the film before the repeat broadcast went on three hours later for the West Coast. In desperation the theatre manager commandeered Bob to explain to the capacity audience just why the feature film was being halted and to

casually suggest that they could see the remainder of the film following the stage show broadcast. Mr. Whiteman commented on Bob's competent handling of a very delicate situation and suggested that radio offered a career for his combined talents — an entry into the field which was accomplished over Station WSJS where Bob's first interview was with . . . Paul Whiteman!

While at Duke, Bob also found time to continue his studies with Bill Dalton, who was at Loew's Richmond at the time. When Dalton left Loew's and went up West Cary Street to the Byrd, Bob followed suit.

As the Duke University Theatre organist Bob heard and played for many famous theatre organists, including Jesse Crawford who called upon him while on a Hammond Organ tour. Asked to play the Wurlitzer, Bob recalls hearing the "poet of the organ" utter the immortal words, "Dear Rudolph, I knew him well." Bob still feels slight tremors when recalling that Crawford asked him to play some of his arrangements so that he might listen from out in the theatre.

Following Duke, Bob became a Hammond artist for Station WSJS, Winston-Salem, and played on Friday evenings in a theatre in Winston-Salem that had a Wurlitzer but, due to the appeal and newness of the Hammond, one was placed on stage and the pipes were forgotten. From Winston-Salem, Bob moved back to Scranton where he played a three-

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BOB VAN CAMP (Continued)



manual, eight-rank Kimball at the West-side Theatre, and broadcasted over Station WGBI.

The war found Bob fighting the battle of Wright Field behind a desk in Dayton, Ohio. During this period he managed to broadcast over WHIO, Dayton. Following the war Bob returned to Scranton, working for a brief period as organist for a roller rink on a Hammond. It was this instrument that brought him to Atlanta in 1947 to play on WSB radio. Bob lost no time in discovering the Fox Theatre and upon starting there as organist found the magnificent instrument in a sad state of repair. At that time the organ was used for brief periods, usually to get the movie screen raised or lowered. When Noble Arnold

became general manager, he brought in Eddie Ford and Stanley Mallote, trying to revitalize interest in the organ. However, when their engagements ended, the mighty Fox organ became a sleeping giant for ten years.

In the winter of 1962, ATOE entered the rather dismal scene in the persons of Tiny James and Erwin Young. After several conferences with Mr. Arnold, an agreement was reached on February 14, 1963, that the organ could be inspected for the possibility of restoration. The details of the restoration of the organ have already been reported in the association's journal. By the Fall of 1963, the organ was in first class condition, thanks to the capable administration of Joe Patten and the many chapter members who worked with him, and Bob one day received a telephone call and still recalls that the words spoken over the phone were, "The Fox organ is going to be used for a show and you are going to play it." So began a busy schedule of working out arrangements, and by November 22 all arrangements had been completed for the great golden console to rise from the orchestra pit when the tragic news of the assassination of President Kennedy was received. It was decided to delay the opening until Thanksgiving Day, an opening that would be a complete, unannounced surprise. That opening went like this.

In the darkened theatre there appeared on the screen the word "Listen" as two

soft notes on the left side of the theatre played. The words "Listen Very Carefully" appeared on the giant screen as two wispy notes on the right side were sounded. Then as the mighty console began its ascent with Bob playing "Georgia On My Mind," the legend on the screen proclaimed that the mighty Fox organ was again in full voice ten years after its silence to delight the thousands of Atlantans who remembered, as well as the thousands too young to remember. The response to the organ was that of overwhelming enthusiasm.

Bob is still very much on the air, having served as musical director and chief announcer for WSB radio for twenty years. His Monday-through-Friday morning six-to-nine program is an institution in Atlanta. However, he still finds time to augment his very hectic schedule by frequent concerts and public appearances. He has been very active in ATOE affairs with concerts in Chicago, Detroit, and Richmond, and when the idea of recording, for the first time, the mighty Moller at the Fox was suggested, there was an immediate conclusion that no one else except Bob could put the instrument on wax. One must live with the instrument as he has done to fully understand it. Having heard the master tape, I can endorse it as a recording to be considered truly a monument to the art of the theatre organ and to the artistry of Bob Van Camp.

The Days of Wine and Roses

"Good afternoon! This is your organist and host, Bolton Holmes, with 25 musical moments at the console of the Grand organ of the Lincoln Theatre in downtown Trenton."

The tune of "I'll Always Be In Love With You" came through the radio. This show always made Sunday afternoons a little nicer. It featured Mr. Burton Holmes at the console of the 3/16 Moller in the R-K-O Lincoln Theatre. The great show has been recently taken off the air.

Not many organs have a history such as the Lincoln's Grand Moller. A 1928 vintage giant, the big ivory and gold console had a tragedy happen at its key-boards. When the Lincoln first opened in 1928, the man who put the first breath into the magnificent Moller was an organist named Stanley Rhodes. At one of the first performances, Mr. Rhodes died at the console.

After this tragedy, an organist named Charles McConnell took over the job of playing the pipes. Just before and during W.W. II, the theatre was used for War Bond rallies. Mr. McConnell helped the late Ernie Kovacs sell bonds by play-

ing the beloved songs of the G.I.'s as Ernie would walk through the aisles graciously accepting payments for the bonds. (Ernie got his start in show business at the Lincoln.)

Following the wartime use the organ was forgotten until 1948, when the great Moller was given back its voice. It continued to be played for the next few years by Mr. McConnell, until he passed away. At this time, Bolton Holmes carried on the duty of bringing the movies to the silver screen and sending them off with a majestic chord. Mr. Holmes has been organist at the Lincoln for 18 years. During this period, the "Lincoln Rockettes" (actually the Lincoln Steppers) were accompanied in their dance routines by the organ. He also helped the "Ballet Rouge" flutter back and forth across the stage. In addition to all this, there was a symphony orchestra to add to the spectacular sound and stage show. Unfortunately, that is all past. The organ still fills the theatre with sound from the "Golden Era" under the guidance of Mr. Holmes' adept hands and feet. Since cold weather has come, quite a few ciphers are evident, but they are being taken



care of. The behemoth is still played every Saturday and Sunday before the matinee.

The Lincoln Moller seems to be the sister organ of the 3/19 Moller from the Sedgwick Theatre in Philadelphia. The consoles of the two organs are exactly the same.

The Lincoln Grand Moller has had three generations of tuning and repair. A Mr. Ben Lenore from Philadelphia first worked on the organ. His son-in-law took over and carried on the work. Now Ben Lenore's grandson keeps the monster in shape. (What devotion!)

The writers have come to the conclusion that this organ is not an antique, but an historical monument to the "Days of Wine and Roses."

—by Charles Balogh and Harry Schroeder