

DON MILLER: THEATRE ORGANIST!

Much has been written in the pages of this magazine about the great movie palaces. More space has been devoted to the mighty voice of the cinema cathedral, the movie pipe organ.

However, the largest factor in the universal appeal of movie houses and organ music during the "Golden Era" were the artists who mastered the glittering horseshoe consoles. It was they who brought forth a new and controversial musical interpretation which still brings a spine-tingling sensation to the listener, and a tear to the eye of another generation whose memories are brought into sharp focus upon hearing the soaring tunes of a theater organ being played by a master artist.

The ace organist is the one who takes over the listener's emotions as he manipulates the stop keys, fingers the manuals, and coaxes the instrument into bringing forth the sounds available from no other source. His ability, knowledge and experience are the ingredients that have kept theatre organ alive over the last forty years, for without his services in the past, our beloved unit pipe organ would now be a forgotten mechanical contrivance of the 1920's.

Such an organist is Don Miller, now 72, who was a sensation at the ATOE 1967 Detroit meeting. Mr. Miller, now retired, "stopped the show" at the Senate Theatre playing the Orbits Wurlitzer. He was asked to be interviewed for THEATRE BOMBARDE and kindly consented. The interview was set up by Al Mason of the Motor City Chapter and conducted by Claude Sheridan of the Chapter.

Mr. Sheridan, by careful choice of questions and comments, was able to obtain much insight on a lifetime career of making people happy through organ music.

Following is the interview of Mr. Miller as taped by Mr. Sheridan.

DON MILLER (at right) addressing his audience at the close of his 1967 ATOE program. Miller's artistry was enthusiastically received by the capacity audience in the Senate Theatre, home of the Detroit Theatre Organ Club. (Below) Don at the console of the Fisher-Orbits Wurlitzer, July 1967.

—PHOTOS: Bill Lamb



Claude: Don is really one of the famous Theatre organists and he has lived and worked in the metropolitan area of Detroit. I have been fortunate to hear him work in the Capitol Theatre in Detroit. We thought it was just about time we got the living record on tape and the history of his accomplishments through the years. He made the Fisher organ famous. What other things have you done?

Don: "I have completed fifty years of playing, having literally played through life. I started at the age of 12 in Perry, Iowa, playing piano for silent movies at 50¢ a night for six nights a week. I played at other theatres during high school and, for about three years, I worked for the man who owned the opera house. He started an orchestra and made me the leader. I made enough money to buy a Model-T Ford. I took shorthand and a typewriting course in high school and capitalized on that. I taught in a private school afternoons
(Continued on Page 6)

DON MILLER (continued)

and played theatre at night. World War I broke out and I was overseas ten months. I came back and settled in Des Moines. They had two Kimballs and a Robert Morton in this area at that time. I started out at the Rialto playing the supper shift only, at \$80 a week for two hours work a night. Quite a change from 50¢ a night. They built the Strand, which had a three-manual Moller, and I was featured with slide solos. My main solo was *Peggy O'Neil*. I then moved over to the Des Moines Theatre which had a two-manual Kimball. They then built the Paramount. Carlos Meyer was the feature artist and I found out they were paying him more money than me. I went to A. H. Blank Theatres for a raise and was stalled off. So I took the cue, packed my baggage and started traveling. I went to the Madison Theatre in Peoria. Everyone laughs about Peoria but it was a good show town. I have pictures of people all lined up waiting to get tickets, and they had good features. I then went to Michigan for the Butterfield Circuit and played the Capitol Theatre in Kalamazoo, Michigan. They had a three-manual Barton. I then went to Saginaw and stayed there a spell with a good engagement also on a three-manual Barton. I got an offer to go into the Hollywood Beach Hotel in Miami, Florida, playing dinner music and concerts. I grabbed that up quick, and it was a marvelous engagement. The instrument was a three-manual Kimball and it had the most realistic Vox Humana I have ever heard. One time for an encore I played the song *In the Gloaming* with a two-part harmony featuring the Vox along with a soft accompaniment. It was so realistic I had everyone in tears, including myself.

"Then I got an offer to come to Detroit and I had been trying to get in. They had built the State Theatre and were using a stage band policy like the Chicago Oriental. They would have Russ Morgan or Paul Ash on stage and Fred Stret, a comediant, MC-ing and they had a pit orchestra which doubled on stage. I was put in to do community singing solos. I was supposed to knock them dead. Although completely inexperienced, I told them I was very good. I was to play four weeks and, if they liked my stuff, I was to get a contract for a year. I played two weeks and they gave me a three-year contract. I arrived in July, 1926, and was to be married in October of that year so what more could you ask for this side of heaven. And for some unknown reason, I was able to get audiences to let go and sing. It was simply marvelous the way they would sing."

Claude: "What kind of organ did you have in the State Theatre?"

Don: "A Wurlitzer four-manual, twenty-rank with piano. There was one just like it in the Capitol Theatre which was their number-one house in the circuit. Then in August of 1926, the Michigan Theatre opened which was a duplicate of the Chicago Theatre. There were a lot of theatres opening at that time—the Madison, the Adams, which were the smaller ones—but all were using organs and orchestras. After the Michigan opened, the State started to slip. They finally went into pictures, and they moved me over to the Capitol which was the pet house of the circuit—a beautiful theatre! The organ sounded marvelous. (It was bought by Bill Holliman for the Arcadia Rink.) The acoustics were outstanding at the Capitol. It was a wide house but not as deep as normal. You could sit in the back of the balcony and see the stage well. It had 3,800 seats. The organ chambers were very low and faced out toward the audience. The organ was a distinct pleasure to play. Then the 5,000-seat Fox opened. They had a 4m-36r Crawford Special Wurlitzer. After this the Fisher opened. The opening of the Fisher was played by Arthur Gutow, and then I took over. I did straight solos for awhile. Then they started using slides but not community singing.

"At the Capitol, I did community singing for awhile but they decided that wasn't classy enough for the Capitol so I went into straight solos. They didn't have the circuit stage shows operating here at this time. The acts were booked independently. The Capitol circuit operators had their own production department and the decision was they would have more like prologues. The Michigan did the same thing. At the Capitol they built stage shows around local talent. The pitmen doubled on the stage. It was then decided to have two stage shows, one built around the organ. We used a scrim and Jimmy Savage of B&K Circuit of Chicago wrote the continuity of my solos, and that was carried just on words. One was called '*Blossoms*' and this was a beautiful production. The first one was '*Cherry Blossom*.' The lights came up behind the scrim and here was a female vocalist in costume singing '*One Fine Day*' from '*Madame Butterfly*.' There was more continuity and that faded out followed by '*Apple Blossoms*.' Over on the opposite side of the stage, a boy and girl were singing '*Apple Blossom Time in Normandy*.' Then for a finale, they had '*Orange Blossoms*' and a full stage wedding. We used a girl in the chorus line, and we hired a line of chorus boys and had a

(Continued on Page 38)

1968 A.T.O.E. CONVENTION VIGNETTES • 1

GREAT TALENT LINEUP FOR CONVENTIONEERS

The array of talent for the 1968 ATOE Convention, which will be held in Los Angeles on July 13 through 16, is developing into a formidable one, according to Convention Chairman Bob Carson. Already lined up for full concerts are Eddie Dunstedter, Ann Leaf, Tom Hazelton, Bill Thomson, Rosa Rio and Lyn Larsen. Now arrangements for "organ crawls" are going ahead full blast, with visits planned to famed studios and residences boasting pipe organs. Included will be the Dick Simonton residence with Gordon Kibbee at the 4-36 Wurlitzer, the Harvey Heck residence with Jim Melander playing the 4-27 Wurlitzer, Johnny Duffy at the 3-26 Carson-Kearns studio recording Wurlitzer, Helen Dell playing the 2-10 Wurlitzer at "Tubes, Inc.," Dean McNichols at the swingin' Bell Friends Church 2-9 Wurlitzer, Bill Field at the 3-19 Wurlitzer at the Iceland skating rink in Paramount, Dwight Beacham at the famed "Haven of Rest" 2-8 broadcast Wurlitzer, and Don Baker at the Robert Morton 4-34 recording organ in the Loren Whitney Glendale studio which he has recorded many times. There will be a special "crawl" to Pasadena to hear George Wright play a brief concert on his 3-30 studio organ. In addition to her concert Rosa Rio will conduct a class on theatre pipe organ playing technique.

Three builders of theatrical electronic organs will have showrooms at the Ambassador, and starting at 11 p.m. nightly the electronics will be "on parade." So far, Baldwin, Conn and Rodgers have arranged for showrooms.

The convention will close in a "blaze of glory" with Gaylord Carter cueing the famous feature-length silent movie comedy, "Safety Last," starring Harold Lloyd, at the Wiltern Theatre on the final night of the convention, the only convention event open to the general public. All other events are limited in attendance to holders of national ATOE membership cards for 1968.

—Stu Green, Hollywood

CHAPTER NEWS, contd.

It is reported that Loew's Theatre (now the Civic Theatre) in Akron, Ohio, had its organ console buried for the performances of "Hello Dolly" March 15 and 16. A temporary runway was built out over the orchestra pit and the organ console for this show only.

The Western Reserve Chapter Sheet also reported that the Tower Theatre (Upper Darby, Penna.) Wurlitzer was still being heard. The Wurlitzer in this theatre was the one the late, great organist Leonard "Melody Mac" MacClain made famous through his series of recordings. Bob Lent is now being featured at this organ. He has been playing for up to a full hour before showtime—complete with colored changing lighting effects plus the atmospheric stars all a-twinkle in the blue sky above. The theatre itself is just beautiful, having been completely redecorated. The management, Messrs. Jones and Zimmerman, plan to have full-scale stage shows and vaudeville, with the organ, as part of the show policy this year. Bob Lent, who is 18 years old, plays the Wurlitzer, also serves as first organ technician, electrical engineer and color combiner for solo presentations. Jan Carroll is second organ technician and in charge of console elevator, and is lighting technician. Bob Beck serves as lighting effect technician. Manager Jones is an enthusiastic backer of the theatre organ concept as part of today's programs at the Tower. Not only did the three-man crew restore the organ to full playing condition, they also put the twinkle back in the ceiling stars and

relamped all the cove, channel and niche lighting. If you get a chance, this is one to see and hear.

It's too bad March decided to be such a lion on the evening of their March meeting at Flo and John Hobbs'. There were many too chicken to try, but the 18 brave ones who made the meeting, the good time had was worth it all. Denny Richards showed and narrated his slides. The evening ended with everyone gathered around the Hammond dreaming of the Morton. Many thanks to Flo and John for being such gracious hosts, and the rest that didn't make it are hoping there will be a next time soon so they can try again.

Marion and George Rogers were hosts to the Lake County Chapter of American Guild of Organists on March 25th. It is understood the Page put out a good performance—both with and without tremulants—and may have improved the opinions of a few A.G.O. members regarding theatre organs. Marion feels that the apparent success of the meeting would lead everyone to believe they might like to invite A.G.O. members to the meetings or those with installations might like to invite them to have a meeting on them . . . possibly some new members????!

The Western Reserve Relay, April issue, carried several interesting letters that were reprinted from the "Diapason Magazine" in regard to "pipe pirates" and "scrap dealers" who have been busy in various parts of the country desecrating good pipe organs for selfish reasons. PADLOCK THOSE CHAMBERS!!!

DON MILLER

(Continued from Page 6)

singer sing 'O Promise Me.' The pit orchestra and organ came in for a smash finale. It was breathtaking. I don't believe, to my knowledge, there was any other theatre doing a production like this. I would love to see spectacles like this presented to an audience of today. The public is ready for things of this nature, but the present-day managements just can't seem to see it yet.

"Siegel, Gutow and myself were all working for the circuit before they sold out to B&K. They would "guest" us around. Gutow would go to the Fisher, I would go to the Michigan, and Siegel would go to the Capitol. And it was that way for a year or so. We were featured in all three of the houses. After B&K took over, the policies changed. Gutow left first, Siegel left second, and I was the last one to go. I went to the 'neighborhoods.' Darned if I was going to shovel! So I went to the Riviera and its Robert Morton. From there I went into the Great Lakes and played a two-week engagement at the Redford Theatre, whose Barton organ has now been restored through the efforts of the Motor City Chapter of ATOE. I also played a two-week engagement at the Royal Oaks which also had a Barton. I played two short engagements at the Punch and Judy Theatre, 600-seat house, at Grosse Point. Edsel Ford and his family were regular visitors at the Punch and Judy. I met the Ford family and found them to be very wonderful people. I did slide solos at this theatre. Sometimes on Saturday night I would run in community singing just for a change. That theatre is still in beautiful condition and its future is apparently quite secure. The 2m-5r Wurlitzer with percussion has now been restored by the ATOE organization and is active. (See Motor City Chapter news in this issue.)

"In the winter season of 1931, I went to the Olympia Theatre in Miami, Florida, which was like a vacation with pay. I played split weeks with slides, some community singing one half of the week and straight solos the balance of the week. They also had a stage show. It was a very pleasant engagement. They booked me twice. Then I returned to Detroit and the Michigan Theatre. I was there for six months. There was a change at the Michigan Theatre and I decided to try Chicago. Upon fulfilling the required six-month residency, I played several nightclubs and obtained a guest engagement at the Southtown and also at the State Lake. I had an offer to come back to Detroit at the Fisher and I grabbed it so quick it wasn't funny.

(To Be Continued Next Issue)

A.T.O.E. FINANCIAL REPORT FOR 1967

	Receipts	Disbursements	Balance
CASH BALANCE JANUARY 1, 1967			\$ 602.92
RECEIPTS:			
Dues	\$20,722.28		
Back issues	413.50		
Advertising	2,398.20		
Organ Manufacturer's Subscription	176.00		
Advances refunded	1,017.73		
Convention 1967	705.58		
Miscellaneous sources	125.10		
DISBURSEMENTS:			
Office Supplies		\$ 1,400.98	
Postage		1,169.56	
Telephone		995.01	
Office operating expenses		2,300.00	
Theatre Organ Bombarde and circulation operating expenses		1,275.12	
Theatre Organ Bombarde—printing		13,323.14	
Travel (\$391.09 of this refunded)		2,337.32	
Advertising expenses		232.99	
National Convention — 1967		701.50	
National Insurance — 1st year		134.00	
Leonard MacClain Memorial Fund		50.00	
Entertainment		70.53	
Misc. (bank adj., post office box rentals, etc.)		141.02	
Dues refunds and chapter dues		454.30	
TOTALS	\$25,558.39	\$24,585.47	
Net increase in cash			972.92
Cash balance end of period December 31, 1967			\$ 1,575.84
Outstanding 1967 bills as of 12-31-67			
Dec. 1967 Theatre Organ Bombarde		2,916.60	
Mailing Service — Oct. issue		57.75	
Mailing Service — Dec. issue		46.45	