

CONTINUATION — PART II



In Part One of this taped interview with Claude Sheridan of Detroit, Don Miller recounted his early years as a theatre performer—from theatre pianist in Perry, Iowa, at age 12; through the formative years and the golden days of the theatre organ; up to the doldrums of the early 30's. It is from the mid-30's that his story continues...

"About this time the Hammond organ had come into being and a competitor, the Orgatron, also made its appearance. The Orgatron was being sold by Hudson's in Detroit. They engaged me to demonstrate this new electronic 'marvel'. I demonstrated from 1:00 to 5:00 each afternoon and became involved in their selling. I was not there too long, as I proved to be rather poor as a salesman. I was more concerned selling my music. As you can see, I had been very active and after the electronic plug-in came, I played everything. I had to take two, three, or four jobs to make money. I was playing five jobs all during the week. I was on call from the funeral home in Detroit. I was playing a twenty-minute spot solo at the Fisher on Friday nights and I did that for five years in the early 50's. I was staff organist on WJR. I played the dinner shift at the Dearborn Inn, and I played all the wedding receptions I could find."

Claude: *I remember you returned to Des Moines during the 40's, didn't you?*

Don: "Yes, I went out there to get out of Detroit. It was pretty crowded during the war. My wife owned a home in Des Moines, so we lived there seven years. I did radio work on KRNT and had a fine church position. I had been organist at our church in Perry, Iowa, when I was a young man. That is very valuable experience for a theatre organist. For instance, Ashley Miller made a recording recently for the Detroit Theatre Organ Club and his closing number was 'You'll Never Walk Alone' and he gave it a 'religioso' treatment which was simply out of this world. He studied in New York. Some of the theatre organists have not been able to have that experience, but to me it was the highlight of his record. I have talked with several others and they feel the same way."

DON MILLER

Theatre Organist

"Anyway I had played—before I retired in 1962—at the Dearborn Inn for eleven years on Hammond (concert). Then I retired and I said to myself, 'I've got my home, and I've got a nice plug-in set up here, and I've got a nice stereo for my tapes.' I thought I would just sit here and listen to others play, but it turned out that wasn't to be. Some people just insisted that I make an occasional appearance which I have done, and my last one was the 1967 National ATOE Convention at the Senate Theatre on the 4m-34r Fisher Orbits Wurlitzer. I didn't want to play the opening concert. George Orbits, who is the owner of the organ and a real organ buff, pressured me to open it and he kept at me. He wanted me to play in the afternoon, and I hate to play afternoon concerts. I'm a nighthawk—I don't get awake until the electric lights come on. So that was one strike against me. It was 88° that day, of all days, and the theatre is not air-conditioned yet. That and coupled with, shall we say, 'advancing' years (you'll notice I'm not saying the word 'old'), but for the good of the cause I finally consented. I can honestly say that I received the greatest appreciation, recognition and acknowledgment of my career."

Claude: *You were an outstanding bit of the entire convention and the applause was appreciatively sincere and well-deserved.*

Don: "I am one of those musicians that feels very strongly and I wouldn't give you a nickel for a player that can't make me feel as well as see and listen. I want to feel what they are doing and I felt the air was charged that afternoon. It was just snapping and the sweat was rolling down the aisle; I was wringing wet. But it's one of those things and, now that it's all over, I am very grateful for the whole experience. It's wonderful that we have the Detroit Theatre Organ Club and it is very successful. The members have pitched in wherever needed and they are bringing the finest artists here. The Motor City ATOE Chapter are for the most part members of DTOC and they are an up-and-coming bunch. It's amazing what they're doing there. Al Mason is a go-getter and a wonderful fellow. He and his wife, Betty, are real organ lovers. Between that couple and George and Muriel Orbits they've got quite a combo of material to keep

things going and progressing. Then, they've got you, Claude, on publicity and experienced as a theatre manager. When they suggested someone interview me I suggested you because you know show business and you feel it. You also know of my background in Detroit."

Claude: *Tell about some of your radio programs you did?*

Don: "I'll start with the sidelights first. While I was in the Hollywood Beach Hotel (Florida), one day a lady came up to the organ and handed me a typewritten piece of paper. She said, 'This is a poem that I have written about your playing. I have been a guest here for some time and it's called *Rivers of Sound*. I have it in my scrapbook and I cherish it very much. You can just sort of imagine how it moved my soul when she had finished it."

"Then in Detroit there was the famous restaurant where all the musicians and theatrical people used to go—the Bungalow Restaurant. They had a menu there with the different local artists' names on it. They had me down as dessert—'a la Don Miller.' Probably double-dipped. Then here is really about the tops. Once in my life I was featured over the picture which was a silent movie. The movie featured Richard Barthelmess in *New Toys* in August, 1925, at the Franklin Theatre in Saginaw, Michigan. I have the newspaper clipping to prove it."

Claude: *That was where the picture accompanied the organist?*

Don: "I played that time the *Light Cavalry Overture*. That was my solo. I used to do a lot of overtures."

Claude: *Overtures were very popular during that time?*

Don: "Oh yes—*Poet and Peasant, Orpheus*—and it took technique to play them. The theatre organ brought them out. In fact, John Muri played a lot of them down at the DTOC and so does Mark Koldys, who is a young genius. It has been gratifying to see the mail that has come in regarding the ATOE Convention concert. One letter said that it was one of the few times that she cried through sheer emotion at hearing organ music. That I prize because she got what I was trying to do. The number that probably moved her was Debussy's *The*

Girl With the Flaxen Hair... very ethereal, you know. The number before that was *Ritual Fire Dance*—everything but the plaster fell off on that one. Those are wonderful experiences and it sort of leaves me speechless but, since this is an interview, I feel that the publishers want to know. In fact, I have had letters from publishers of the magazine and they want to know these little personal things because it is just something that a good many of the organists have dropped out of the picture because there just wasn't the work and they ended up in some funeral home. That was about it, or teaching."

Claude: *Regarding your theme, WATERS OF THE PERKIOMEN, I certainly remember it, and I am certain other people in the Detroit area remember the broadcast 20's. It was customary for the circuit to have the different organists on different nights of the week at midnight after show, and I especially remember during the depression years—'32 and '33—when so many of the theatres were closed that you were playing on WXYZ from both the Capitol and State Theatres at one time or another. One of my fondest memories is of going over to the State to hear you playing personally on some of those programs. You had a little fishing shanty built over the console in the dead of the winter and had an electric heater in the corner.*

Don: "In those days we played about three hours. There were two organists. The other organist, Margaret Werner, played about three half-hour shows a day sustaining, and I did about three."

Claude: *I can remember your playing fifteen minutes, then off for half an hour, and then play for another fifteen, and so on.*

Don: "That's right. There was no rehearsal time and commercials hadn't taken over radio yet."

Claude: *Also I remember that you played the Fox over WWJ for a year.*

Don: "I broadcast the Fox organ over WXYZ at 7:00 o'clock in the morning when there was no one in there. There was a big reverberation in there. It is a big barn of a theatre, but a beautiful house. I was recently down there after the convention at the invitation of Motor City Chapter President Henry Przybylski. He had been after me to play so I went down and played for about three hours. There were about twelve other professionals and we all got up and did our bit. I've got my tape of that Fox and I'm glad I did—it is magnificent! It's funny. When I sat down at the console they expected me to tear off some snappy number to open with, but I happened to remember a number that I had broadcast in the early 30's. It was

on Thanksgiving morning and I played the Doxology, *Old Hundred Hymn*. There are four Voxes on that organ so I started off the first stanza with chimes for four bars and an answer with the Vox Humana for four bars and more chimes and more Vox until the first stanza was finished. Then I went into the second stanza—the cathedral part of it. No tremolos and all diapacons with some reeds. Then I changed keys from G to C which naturally built up and I started with the crescendo pedal clear off but I kept building up to the most gorgeous, thrilling, majestic climax I have ever heard completing the third stanza. It is a crime the way theatre organs are being treated."

Claude: *I am glad there are groups like the DTOC and ATOE restoring these organs to playing condition.*

Don: "They try to tell you they are not in the nostalgia business in the theatre organ world. But I am afraid they are, because it is the organ of the early picture days that is the inspiration for the players of today and don't ever think they are not getting ideas from the players of the older days. Of course, the new players are real wonderful. There is Billy Nalle, and George Wright has had lots of theatre experience, and Lyn Larsen played wonderfully here recently. Then speaking of this nostalgia business, the August issue of the *Review of the Organizer*, a magazine from California, said that there were two silent movie veteran organists that literally 'stole the show' and if anyone wants to know who they are they can get the August issue of the *Organizer*. One of them was Don Baker. You see, there is nostalgia yet in the theatre business."

Claude: *You have had a marvelous career and certainly an interesting one. There is no question about that. You have brought a great deal of pleasure to a great many people throughout the years. I think it is most interesting and most appropriate that even now you are able to thrill and entertain audiences in a way that many of them never knew before because they were not around in the days when the theatre organ was so popular.*

Don: "I am a devotee of the style of organ playing where on ballads you make the organ sing. Leonard MacClain was a great artist at that. When you put those words on the screen that organ had to talk those words—sing it—flow it through. It was just wonderful on ballads. The tendency of today's new players is that they play awfully loud all the time and too fast. Now I remember when I played a soft number for the July concert at the convention that at the end I received quite a wonderful

applause. I said, 'I'm like you. I like soft music and I like loud music, but I don't like it loud all of the time.' That is not a criticism. I am just saying these things because it might mean something to somebody and it might not. But there is no ego in any of these remarks that I am a very humble and grateful person for all of this. Of course, I will admit when I was a dashing juvenile and my picture and name were all over this town of Detroit that I was tempted to think that I was pretty good, but I soon got that knocked out of me. It all came so quick that I can understand why these people who are made overnight can't help it going to their heads. They're in a whirl and they simply go from 50 bucks a week into the hundreds."

Claude: *Success never spoiled you even back in the late 20's during the peak of your career. You were one of the nicest fellows a person could know and certainly were very nice to me when I would come down and sit on the rail at night when you were practicing. When I was courting my wife in those days, it was really a cheap but pleasant day to come down and hear you broadcast. We really enjoyed it.*

Don: "I would like to say a word for the California theatre publications. They are doing a lot of good. It's amazing, but I counted one day nearly forty places that are really organ-conscious out there."

Claude: *That is true and I hope the whole country will become that way.*

Don: "Maybe if they do, some smart theatre operator will get an organ, get a wonderful artist and feature him. He'll make some money. Now I know what I'm talking about because when I was at the Fisher in 1956, the stage hands and the operators struck for a raise. We were putting on productions there complete with effects, changing lights, and curtains that had to be snapped opened and closed just so, and all this and all that. The General Manager of the Publix Circuit disliked unions. So he said, 'I'll fix them.' He cut out the organ solo and out I went! The theatre manager, Jack Sage (a real organ buff), personally told me that he showed the figures to the General Manager concerning the drop in business. I had played there on a Friday night for about a twenty-minute spot. He showed the figures of the drop of intake for two months on Friday nights trying to get him to put it back, but the circuit wouldn't do it. Jack moved to California and has since passed on. There was a neat little difference between when they had the organ and when they didn't have the organ. They could hire a good name organist, pay him a good salary, feature him, and they could really go to town."

Claude: *Well certainly in those years since you were the only organist playing in the theatre in Detroit you, yourself, did a great deal to keep the interest alive because many of the people who are members of ATOE and DTOC made it a habit of going down to the Fisher on Friday nights just to hear you play. Many folks who weren't around in the heyday of the organ in the 20's and 30's and weren't familiar with it were able to go down to the Fisher and hear Don Miller at the Mighty Wurlitzer. It created a lot of interest in a lot of people.*

Don: "The Detroit Theatre Organ Club has made me an Honorary Member and I think there is just one other—Don Baker. There may be three. I am also Honorary Member of the Motor City Chapter of ATOE. It's a nice gesture and very much appreciated."

"I did want to mention how these publications are digging up all this material on organs. It started out about twelve years ago in St. Paul and now they have over 3,000 members of ATOE. Then there is a new magazine of the A.G.O.—Music/The A.G.O. Magazine, published in New York. Billy Nalle has a column in that called "Leave It to Billy." The renaissance of the theatre organ needs souping up. I hope the DTOC will get him very quickly here. I think they're negotiating for him now. He's been at Rochester and he pulled in 1,500 people at \$3 a seat. I claim that's a good drawing power."

(Ed. note: Billy Nalle has since played a smash concert for DTOC. See April issue.)

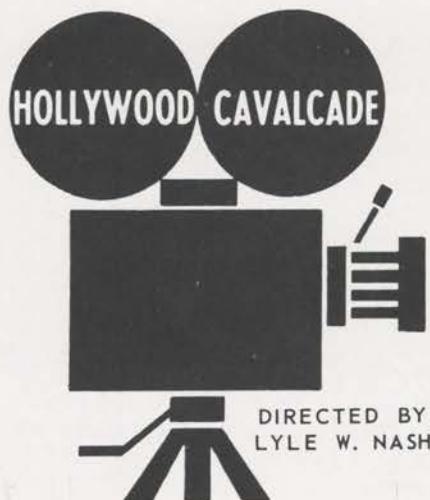
Claude: *Don, it has been pleasing talking to you and reminiscing about the wonderful career you have had, and anyone reading what you have to say will share with me the feeling that there will be for many, many years a Don Miller at the console to entertain all theatre organ buffs.*

Don: "God Bless all my listeners and readers."

DON MILLER turns as neat a verbal phrase as he does a musical one, viz the following:

"Two standing ovations in one program, I've never had in my life before. Sometimes the good things come late in life. I don't know if you read the paper or not, but I'll be 71 in September. You know—there are three things I'm sure all of us want, we long for . . . we need it. That's Appreciation, Recognition and Acknowledgement. You have given me all three this afternoon, and I thank you. And God bless you."

—1967 National Convention, Senate Theatre, Detroit



A READER asks "What famous film personalities of long ago are still missing from the Hollywood Walk of Fame?"

A. Many. There are now over 1,600 names implanted on sidewalks along Hollywood Boulevard and Vine Street. New names are added at infrequent intervals. There is room for about 1,400 more names. Some notables have stars at several locations. Gene Autry and Tony Martin have four stars each. Charlie Chaplin is sadly missing. His son, Charles, Jr., once failed in a court action to force placement of his father's name in one of the 36-inch squares of charcoal terrazzo.

MISSING names include May Allison, Betty Bronson, Billy Bevan, James Kirkwood, Dorothy Mackaill, Frances Marion, Shirley Mason, Patsy Ruth Miller, Ned Sparks and Florence Vidor.

FICKLE fate laughed when the stars of W. C. Fields, John Barrymore and Errol Flynn were all placed almost together in front of a cocktail lounge entrance.

IN 1921-22 Douglas Fairbanks was making Robin Hood. Hundreds of visitors filled the United Artists studio grandstands daily. One morning Fairbanks staged a rare treat. As the entire crew and visitors watched, the drawbridge of the castle slowly lowered, then a slight figure dressed as a tramp walked nonchalantly out carrying a cat. He crossed the drawbridge, put the cat down, picked up a bottle of milk, the morning newspaper, looked around and then calmly strolled back into the castle as the giant drawbridge closed.

FAIRBANKS always regretted he did not have a cameraman film this action, for the actor in the humorous little tableau was Charlie Chaplin.

RICHARD Barthelmess, Richard Dix, Adolph Menjou, Lon Chaney, Rudolph Valentino, John Gilbert and Douglas Fairbanks were beloved by millions of film fans and generated gigantic box office business. Yet they were never honored with an Oscar.

WHO Is That? by Warren B. Meyers, is a book of 613 photographs of the best actors and actresses ever in films. It is a perfect guide to the late-late show on TV when you ask: "Who . . . is that old geezer? . . . I know him but . . ." These players were the flesh and blood who carried the paper-thin story lines on "B stinkers," many of which starred a sex-bomb who could not act her way out of a negligee. Faces you will recall fondly include Patsy Kelly, Charles Lane, Reginald Owen and Fritz Feld.

ELEVEN Valentino films will be featured at the 1969 Berlin film festival. Pictures to be shown include such rare ones as: *The Cobra, Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Monsieur Beaucaire, Camille* and *The Sheik*.

FORTY-FIVE years have slipped by since *The Covered Wagon* plodded across the nation's silver screens in 1923. Ernest Torrence and Tully Marshall proved in this classic that great acting is timeless. Recently a young critic saw the Paramount vintage hit and declared: "Torrence and Marshall would outclass most of today's crop of unwashed, unclad characters. They were noble actors." I agree. I saw the film recently and think Torrence was one of the great film character actors of all time.

TOM MIX has been dead for 28 years but his fans recently dedicated a museum of Mix memorabilia in Oklahoma. Bob Birchard, Mix research expert, says it is an excellent collection, well worth viewing.

ROY D'ARCY, whom fans will recall as the dashing Count of the 1925 *Merry Widow*, with Mae Murray, lives in quiet retirement in Redlands, Calif.

POSITIVE information about Cinecon III to be held in Hollywood Sept. 1 and 2 is not available. This gathering of movie fans of the silent era (collectors, too) is scheduled but a program of events was not available when deadline time came.

PERSONAL NOTE — It was heartwarming to meet scores of ATOE delegates at the big meeting, July 13-16, in Los Angeles. I've always felt ATOE people were great — now I know.