

A Swinging Weekend In San Francisco - Oakland With George Wright & Don Baker

It isn't often that one has the opportunity of choosing between concerts played by two ex-New York Paramount console artists, but that's the way it was during the weekend of November 15-16 in San Francisco. Would it be Don Baker or George Wright?

Actually, no one had to make such a decision because George Wright played two evening concerts and a matinee while Don Baker, and a fast-rising colleague, Bud Iverson, played their one show opposite only George's third performance.

Despite sparse advertising, George drew a crowd of better than 800 on each night, enough to fill the Avenue theatre comfortably. The matinee was presented chiefly for those who work weekend nights, especially professional organists who might want to hear George. They came in droves.

We took in the first performance, Friday evening. There was an air of excitement in the audience; it would be George Wright's first theatre organ performance since that memorable *farewell* concert he played at the now gone San Francisco Paramount (the style 285 Wurlitzer now graces the Vollum estate near Portland, Oregon).

The 3-14 Wurlitzer in the Avenue



HOLLYWOOD STYLE—A huge searchlight sweeps across the facade of the Avenue Theatre to herald the gala event. — Stufoto

theatre is a regular attraction at that house. It was the subject of an in-depth article in the April, 1968 issue of this magazine: *What's New on the Avenue?* The organ and theatre have had their ups and downs since the appearance of the article and at one time the organ was about 75 percent removed when it seemed the theatre would close. And close it did, only to reopen under the sole management of Vernon Gregory, one of the two original partners.

George opened with a fast-moving and slightly wild *Così Cosa* which settled the audience. Then he turned to greet his enthusiastic listeners and announced *The Nearness of You*, which received a Tibia'd ballad treatment.

There were snatches of humor in *Frankie and Johnny*, played on often growly reeds while a counter melody meandered. There was even a chime *requiem* for Johnny. *Deep Night* is remembered as George's radio theme on the *Home Federal Savings* show out of San Francisco, but radio audiences never heard it in such variegated styles, even in beguine tempo.

El Relicario, a fast-moving paso doble, was the nearest George approached the bull ring. Plenty of brass, tambourine and fanfares. Then *Frasquita Serenade*, a tribute to the string groups which still play behind the potted palms in Viennese restaurants, but no more in America.

George's *Finian's Rainbow* included *How Are Things in Glocca Schmokka* (that's what the man said) and a lilting *Old Devil Moon*, during which the organist stopped playing and sang a couple of measures, just for the hell of it.

Mr. Wright was in an ebullient mood and he established a good rapport with his listeners from the start. At one point, he stood up on



AIN'T THIS PRETTY? George Wright anticipated the flashbulb by clowning for the photographer. He likes the instrument, a 3-14 Wurlitzer originally installed in the State Lake Theatre, Chicago. — Stufoto

the organ bench "because the organ lift isn't working."

Next was Victor Herbert's *Al Fresco*, a tune which just had to be on the other side of that old "78" of *Frasquita Serenade*, both most likely performed by the Brunswick Salon Orchestra.

A somewhat wandering melody marked a lesser-known Richard Rodgers tune, *A Ship Without a Sail*, which was given a subtle nautical treatment, if those Chrysoglott arpeggios were intended to be *waves*. The *stop motion* of a soft shoe routine titillated the ears during *Dream a Little Dream of Me*, and there was an abundance of Latin fireworks in *Mexican Hat Dance*.

Then George had some fun with the Diet-Rite Cola jingle, *Whataya Got to Lose?* There was a little samba tempo and calliope *ooh-hoo* with bells that seemed to fizz just right. *Going Out of my Head* illustrated the effect of extended unification on certain stops, in this case the strings. George grabbed a fistfull of keys in the middle of a manual and the sound was that of just about every string octave from 16' to 1' together, a commanding sound. Another arresting effect heard during this mod tune was the use of a theme which sounded very much like one of Gershwin's piano preludes to counter the melody. All of which left the listener lots to ponder during intermission.



BETWEEN THE ACTS—George chats with friends and admirers during intermission in his dressing room—actually the relay room beneath the stage. — Stufoto



LET THE LIGHTNING FLASH! — Stufoto



Bud Iversen and Don Baker pose beside a "Conn 642." The scaffolding holds a pair of gigantic mirrors which let the audience view the manual activities. — Stufoto

When he returned to the console George had switched to a summery light-colored suit in defiance of the nippy weather. His opener was a spirited *Funiculi Funicula* followed by *Memories of You* with melody on a throaty Tibia/Vox combination. It was one of the few tunes heard which aroused memories of the Jesse Crawford style.

George then informed listeners that his Dot Records contract had been renewed and that his upcoming recordings would be one played with a rock group (murmurs of protest) and then an Ellington tribute (sighs of approval). Which led right into a medley of the Duke's tunes, beginning with *Don't Get Around Much Anymore* with spicy Posthorn accents, *In a Sentimental Mood*, *I'm Beginning to See the Light* on a Kinura-topped melody combination played in up-tempo, then Billy Strayhorn's ever beautiful *Lush Life* for a closer. Heady stuff!

George continued with *Estrellita*, a bouncy *Flying Down to Rio* (with plane motor roar, of course), and a most interesting orchestration of *Can't Take My Eyes Off You*.

Then George did an interview. He went out into the audience and selected tiny Blanche Ehat and escorted her to the organ bench. Mr. Wright has an uncanny knack for selecting the right people for such spur-of-the-moment didoes; Blanche turned out to be a former "carny girl" who knew carnival life intimately and wasn't hesitant about answering George's questions in the glare of the spotlight. He even got her to recollect the old circus days riot call, *Hey, Rube!* To compensate her for her help in entertaining,

George asked what Blanche would like to hear. The chance of a lifetime; a great artist with much of the world's finest music at his fingertips waiting to play her choice — and Blanche asked for *Alley Cat!* Some day, perhaps, we may find it in our heart to forgive Blanche.

Next came an atmospheric *I Left My Heart in San Francisco* (and George really meant it!). He then told his audience that this could be considered the first of a new series of *farewell concerts* (he played them for years at the much mourned Fox theatre), and announced his closer, the *Military March* from Saint Saëns' *Algerian Suite*. It proved a stunner, a brilliant concert piece which made demands on the organ quite in contrast with previous ones. It was rhythmic, majestic, imaginative, and absorbing in Mr. Wright's hands, a most fitting closer for an evening of topflight theatre organ music.

After the happy audience had filed out, George returned to the console for press photos (he does this to spare his audience the distraction of flashbulbs). While we shot the photos on these pages, we noticed a young friend, organist Gary Konas, hovering in the background. His youthful eyes shone with riches he had absorbed during the evening as he said, "I can hardly wait for tomorrow afternoon."

What's doing?

"I mean I'm coming here for the matinee."

But you just heard the concert.

"I sat in the first row — where I could try to observe Mr. Wright's technique. At the matinee I'll sit back and concentrate on the music."

And tomorrow night?

"I don't know yet. I'll probably sit in the first row again."

Such is George Wright's musical appeal to one ambitious young musician, and we encounter it with increasing frequency.

* * * * *

On the following evening (Saturday) it was the Aahmes Temple (Shriners) in Oakland for a two-artist concert played by an organist whose music and engaging personality have endeared him to several generations of organ music enthusiasts — Don Baker. Don was assisted and abetted by a young artist whose experience in every way complements the Baker stylings, Bud Iversen, a Bay Area musician who first came to our attention when he, in effect, substituted for Don when the veteran organist couldn't make the 1967 Home Organ Festival.

Because our interest is primarily in pipe organs we will treat this event in much less detail than the Wright concert. We hope this will not be considered as a slight to either artist; both are tops on pipes and much of that technique is bound to carry over to their efforts on plugins. And luckily, the Conn, in our estimation, is one of the better plugins (a pair of the new, transistor-powered type 642's with an imposing array of "pipe speakers" were used by the artists).

The program was sponsored and staged by the Pacific Council for Organ Clubs. The same hardworking staff which makes the annual Home Organ Festival a reality was credited on the program for this show, which was made possible by arrangements with the Conn Organ Company through its Bay Area rep, Pliny Allen.

(Continued on Page 36)

Wright - Baker

(Continued from Page 5)

The Aahmes Temple auditorium is a large hall with a high ceiling, a good place for music. At the appointed hour, Don and Bud marched to the twin consoles and played their overture, a duet of *Galloping Comedians*. Then Don stepped to the microphone.

"I'm certain that you in the audience have noticed quite a difference in our ages. In deference to the older man, I'm allowing Bud Iverson to play first." Don sauntered into the wings, leaving Bud looking somewhat nonplussed. But he recovered quickly and went into his first medley, which was rich in tunes by Fritz Kreisler, an Iverson specialty. The organ sounded big and full and there was a lot of registration variety.

Then Don Baker appeared for his first medley. Those familiar with the Baker style appreciate the emphasis Don puts on phrasing and shading in his arrangements. He often brings the volume level down to a whisper, then builds slowly to a thunderous level, and back down to a whisper again. Halfway through his first medley, sounds from a Shriners' event in a nearby banquet hall started interfering with the auditorium show. A combo with an amplified vocalist and a glockenspiel penetrated the soft passages of organ music. It was most distracting to the approximate 700 present but there was nothing to be done; there just wasn't enough separation between the two halls to maintain acoustic isolation. It was a bad scene during light passages.

Of course both organists brought up volume levels to cover the interference but the penetrating power of that glockenspiel was maddening.

The program consisted of pops and standards, expertly registered on the Conn's transistors, performed in two medleys by each organist before intermission, and two afterward. Besides the overture, two other selections were played as duets, *Deep Purple* (with Bud at the concert

San Diego Fox Morton

(Continued from Page 6)

a brief trip through the organ's solo stops (a bright Clarion stood out) while the volume built slowly for a mighty finish. Bob's appearance was limited by the proximity of his afternoon appearance with the post band, so he had to quit after three tunes.

The instrument is now in good shape with a sound not unlike that of the smaller San Francisco Orpheum Morton, and the theatre is planning a series of public concerts with the help of the group which repaired the instrument. The group, as yet unnamed, has a firm agreement with the theatre management and owner covering the future use of the instrument, public and private. No organ club or ATOE chapter is being planned. Concerts will start as soon as the restoration is complete and some name organists have been booked.

— Peg Nielsen, San Diego

grand), and the finale, *There's No Business Like Show Business*.

Don scored with his arrangements of *Blurette*, *Shadow of Your Smile*, *Born Free*, *Mame* and that powerhouse Baker arrangement of *Cherokee*. Iverson played memorable versions of two originals, *Berenice* and *Conn-jetti* (pure apple polishing!), *By the Time I Get to Phoenix*, *Stars in My Eyes* and the descriptive Ferde Grofe piece with which he made solid points at the 1968 Home Organ Festival, *On the Trail*. Fortunately, no one "called for Phillip Morris" this time.

Don and Bud closed their well-received program with an expansive but brief chorus of *Show Biz*, took their well-earned bows and posed for press photos. "Gosh, I feel important" said Don, as the flashbulbs blinded him for a moment. Bud didn't say anything. He was too busy signing autographs for a bevy of pretty girls.

— Stu Green & Peg Nielsen

Gaylord Carter at RKO ALBEE

(Continued from Page 13)

Also among the guests were Dr. and Mrs. Jack M. Watson (Dean of the College-Conservatory of Music of the University of Cincinnati). Dr. Roberta Gary, well-known concert organist, attached to the organ department of the College-Conservatory, was introduced to *The Big Chase* and other assorted silent film organ scores by Gaylord. Bach was never like this! Dr. and Mrs. Watson were taken back to earlier days, when they resided in Hollywood, and had listened to Gaylord when he was staff organist at Grauman's Million-Dollar, Egyptian, Hollywood, and others. WKRC-T.V. News Director Bob Jones and his charming wife Janet were present and accounted for. Bob has become identified as the MC for the Ohio Valley Chapter's annual silent film presentations over the past four years at the RKO ALBEE. Bob prepared a "special" related to the *Flicker Fingers* offering, which was aired on his 11:00 P.M. news program, one week prior to the show WKRC T.V. camera crews went down to the ALBEE, and filmed Bob coming up on the big band car elevator; from this impressive position, Bob gave his viewers some background on our beautiful Cinema Palace, as well as on Gaylord and the film *SAFETY LAST*. Our Chapter, as well as persons everywhere who share an interest in theatre organ, are indebted to people such as Bob Jones for their warm-hearted cooperation and assistance in line with the cause.

Other guests included Mr. and Mrs. Walter Barnett and Mr. and Mrs. David Sonenshein of Barnett Organ & Piano Company . . . to whom the Chapter is grateful for providing the *Gulbransen* Rialto theatre model for the show.

Sunday, October 20th, was a beautiful day in Cincinnati . . . made-to-order for a *Flicker Fingers* presentation. By 6:30 P.M., the crowds had started to gather out front and in the gorgeous ALBEE lobby. Stanley-