

# The Organ Plays "GOLDEN FAVORITES"

## HOW THE READERS DIGEST RECORD SET EVOLVED

When you buy a theatre organ recording, do you ever wonder how it came about? There it is in its slick jacket sealed in sparkling cellophane, a track of modulated grooves, good, bad or indifferent, which had to have a start somewhere.

There are many steps and processes involved in making a recording and we can't possibly cover them all in a single article.

Therefore, let us assume that the Readers Digest, encouraged by the response to previous organ record offerings, decides on another 4-disc package. The initial jobs are lining up talent and instruments. Usually, the organists selected can suggest suitable instruments.

The Digest chose four well-known and highly skilled organists: Richard Purvis, Paul Michelson, Richard Leibert and Billy Nalle. These artists were willing and able to suggest suitable instruments: The San Francisco Grace Cathedral 100+ ranks of Aeolian-Skinner and the Boston Symphony Hall Aeolian-Skinner (Purvis); the Wanamaker Store organ in Philadelphia and the huge instrument in St. John the Divine's Cathedral in New York (Michelson). These would make up the concert on "straight" organ portions of the release.

On the theatre organ side, Dick Leibert has long been associated with the Radio City Music Hall 4-58 Wurlitzer and he also likes the Auditorium theatre 4-22 Wurlitzer of the RTOS in Rochester, N.Y. Billy Nalle once recorded the Richard Weber organ for the Mirrosonic label and would like to record it again in its new home, the Strand theatre in Plattsburgh, N.Y. And he fell in love with the Detroit Theatre Organ Club's 4-34 Wurlitzer when he played a concert there. So we have four organists and eight organs.

Moving ahead through many preliminary arrangements, let's examine the work of producing one of the four recordings which will comprise the set, "The Organ Plays Golden Favorites," from three viewpoints, the organist's, the organ owner's and a newspaper reporter's.

Billy Nalle is responsible for 12 selections on one disc. They are light classics and what are generally called "standards" — "Through the Years", "Only a Rose", "The Old Refrain", "Jalousie", "Parade of the Wooden Soldiers", "Blue Tango", "My Hero", "Always", "Kammenoi - Ostrow" — all solid musical values. How did his re-

sponsibility for the "golden 12" evolve? Let's let the organist tell us.



**NOW WHERE DID I PUT IT?**—During his Detroit session, Billy looked into this mass of symmetrical pipework and remarked that "the lost chord has got to be in here, someplace." It's the Orbit's 4-34 Wurlitzer on lease to the Detroit Theater Organ Club.

### THE BIRTH OF A VINYL 'CHILD'

by Billy Nalle

How do you start planning an album? What really happens when you're recording? Attempting to answer these questions calls for a person to leave mother, doctor, lawyer and his guardian angel far behind while he whistles the old hymn "Just As I Am Without One Plea." Warning: No two people conceive, gestate and give birth to a vinyl child by the same formula, much less a foolproof one! What works for one player is too kooky to be believed by another. Ready for one man's rundown? — or rather, countdown? Well, unhitch your old gray mare, put on your outer space suit and we'll do some underseas research.

My recipe is similar to that for hatching a concert program. Until shortly before recording time, no playing is done at the keyboard. Pieces are played mentally and every possible factor is drained and weighed for story value. A piece which has too little story to tell or, worse, is pretentious, is rejected. This period takes as much courage as imagination. One of the keys to good programming is saying "no" early enough. Otherwise, you later will have on your hands a "mule in horse harness." (Example: "You'll Never Walk Alone" is a thoroughbred; "The Impossible Dream" is a mule.)

Then comes a juggling of pieces to strike a balance not only from piece to piece but between this or that grouping. In turn, groups, and then both sides of the album must have balance in everything from "weight" to moods. Ultimately, I'll gauge the opening piece of the first side with the final piece of the second side. Not for an instant can you "take a nap" on listener psychology any more than on the psychology of the

musical story. A piece which a listener won't enjoy to the full early in the recording he will find delightful later. The piece won't be different later, the listener will. The challenge is not only to get his interest at the beginning; it's to keep it through the biggest and longest story of all, the entire album.

You have your total menu planned. Now comes that nebulous time called "arranging." For many musicians this means pencil, score sheets and a big eraser. For me, years of playing by ear make hearing and arranging at a "mental keyboard" far easier and faster. This "peace-and-quiet" system works equally well in planning registration so that only minor changes for clarity and balance need be made at the organ. The piece will tell you how it wants to go, if permitted. The more you get yourself out of the way the more the message comes through "loud and clear." If showing off various ranks of pipes or playing loudly or playing fast or cutting a handsome hindsight at the console is more important than music, per se, then you're in trouble. You may not know it until it's too late, but, console kid, you're in trouble.

Finally the "Moment of Truth" and you wade through cables, Ampex tape monsters and microphones to join the audio, tape and organ engineers and the producer. It's like the patient arriving in the operating room and giving a cheery "hi!" to the doctors and nurses. There is brief discussion on what section of the program to take in what order. You approach the console; everything about it looks as it did the previous day. Yet, somehow, it isn't quite the same and you can't put your finger on why. Perhaps it's the intensity of recording demands which barely are equalled at any other playing time. At this point I always think of the opening line from that marvelous article entitled "How To Dismount From An Elephant: The first thing you must do . . . is to collect yourself."

Several attempts may be made to record the desired performance of a piece. Each such is called a "take,"



Billy spent plenty of time at the DTOC's setter board, selecting combinations for use during his Senate Theater session in Detroit.

regardless of duration, and is given a different number for identification. Thereby the producer in later editing can locate quickly the desired "take" of every piece. The number of "takes" can go as high as the protein of the player and the patience of the producer can endure. If my feeling for a piece isn't completely in focus, I'll put it aside and go to another, possibly not returning to the earlier one until as late as the next day. To me, getting a full-blooded performance is the chief thing. Occasionally I'll accept some minor misdemeanor if the particular "take" really sings the story. Of course, music and the other six lively arts do not canonize sloppiness. However, neither do they take kindly to the "Lysol Treatment." If the player's pride takes precedence, then there will be times when he is more fastidious than God.

Some pieces fall naturally into a set arrangement and vary little during recording; others may prove elusive. In these latter, no more than the basic framework (called form) and general character are in my mind when recording begins. Perhaps the piece will unwind its truth gradually, perhaps all in one moment's inspiration. Listening intently not only to the organ but also to the personality of the piece is crucial. Creating "in transit" makes a producer extremely nervous. He views with dread and foreboding, being certain it will lead to overtime and gasping budget. Consequently, you do not advertise your inspirations from DHQ (Divine Headquarters) during recording. After "the strife is o'er, the battle done," you can add to his storehouse of useless information.



**IT WAS RIGHT HERE LAST NIGHT** — Billy Nalle looks for a stop key during his first taping session at the Strand. The tension which accompanies recording explains why it seems that Gremlins take over after the last rehearsal and rearrange the stops to befuddle the artist about to record.

Your last piece is on tape, the whole album done and "in the can." You remember no more the anguish for joy that an album child has been born.

When a child of flesh is born, the bearer and the borne have immediate rendezvous. However, with a vinyl child there's no such luck! The performer is kept in limbo from a few weeks to a year. My experience when hearing the whole album again after its release is to think it better or worse but never the same as when recorded. Duke Ellington has the wise answer: "My best album is my next one."

The personal and musical disciplines I face in recording are inconvenient, difficult and sometimes embarrassing. They also are one thing more — necessary. You learn that you can deal with the music only to the extent that you can deal with yourself. In this connection, the use of a tape recorder is of highest value. You can't argue with it!

Giving honest answers to questions about a recording, making music in any medium, must include the source of music. A score filled with notes or a reel of recorded tape is not music. Music does not exist until its sounds begin. Music enables minds and hearts to communicate and share in ways no other kind of language can equal. I don't know of any way of getting a performance of music unless physical and material realities are put to use. Neither do I know of any way of breathing life into music without the spiritual reality which gives the performer himself his breath of life. The only real music I ever played came from acknowledging and cooperating with all three realities. I'm a Catholic, specifically a member of the Anglican family (called Episcopalian in the U.S.), probably the only family which can put up with me. Therefore, I'm convinced that all three realities ultimately are gifts. If the gifts are wonderful, then how much more so is the Giver. One man's experience would answer those questions at the beginning by saying it's essential to talk it over at every stage with DHQ. The Law, the Prophets and the Apostles agree when our Lord says (as does the title of an Ellington piece) "Do Nothin' 'Til You Hear From Me."

Next, let's get the viewpoint of the organ's owner. His instrument has been selected for recording. Naturally he wants his pride and joy to sound its very best when captured in microgrooves. For some unexplained reason, the owner is too often the last to learn about a planned recording of his instrument. But recording companies don't mind waiting; they'll give any organ owner a couple of days to re-leather that leaky chest or voice a couple of ranks of honky reeds. Dick Weber was more fortunate than most; they allowed him a whole week.



**TUNING CAN BE TEDIOUS** — Audrey Weber reads while holding down keys as Dick Weber tunes pipes in a chamber. If Dick takes too long, she props a pencil between keys to spell weary digits.

## GETTING THE INSTRUMENT READY

by Dick Weber

This recording project really stirred up the dust. Joe Habig, RCA's producer, called for permission to use the organ with only a week's notice for the play date and confirmation by letter.

The wife and I rolled out of bed about 4 a.m. every morning to completely dive headlong into all innards of the instrument. Even after Billy arrived and started working over his program at the console on Saturday a.m., we continued to re-leather, regulate and voice. Even an extension of the exposed 8' Tibia was added to give Billy all he required to meet his exacting performance. And don't I know what a perfectionist this great guy is!

So our day throughout the recording session averaged around 14 hours. Went home with a full growth of whiskers and crusted from sweat and dust! But we would do it all over again. The result of all our efforts left everyone — Billy, RCA and the Weber family — in great spirits at the fantastic sound recorded! The RCA Engineers remarked that it was the quietest and yet most brilliant theatre organ they had ever recorded. Ernie mentioned that that opinion went back to and included the era of Jesse Crawford at the Paramount! So we're anxiously awaiting the Reader's Digest album.

Now let's attend a recording session as experienced by a newspaper reporter. Journalist Lois Bassett was given a routine assignment by her editor; something unusual was going on at the Strand Theatre. Look in and see if there's a story for the Plattsburgh "Press Republican."

Lois dropped in and saw the possibilities. Her story, reproduced in part, provides the impressions of a reporter who isn't necessarily organ oriented. Yet, it's an enthusiastic one. Being a woman, she dreamed up a romantic lead-in for the piece, starting with the headline —

## 'OLD FLAMES' REKINDLE ROMANCE

PLATTSBURGH — "The Wooing of Winifred" was taking place and I was there.

Suitor was Billy Nalle, New York City theatre organ impressario.

Object of his ardent ministrations was a massive bit of femininity whose every whim had to be catered to before she would respond favorably.

Scene: The darkened Strand Theatre. Time: 10 a.m.

Silhouetted against lights from the console, Nalle appeared to be sacrificing himself before a towering "altar" of banked lights, pipes and electronic paraphernalia.



**PRECARIOUS PERCH** — Dick breathes easier tuning the 16' Bourdon is finished. It's a speaking display set mounted high on the back wall of the stage and dramatized by "black light."

As he evoked pure liquid notes from Winifred's soul, her response was at first subdued. But as his mastery continued, Winifred succumbed.

The "tryst" culminated in a trilling crescendo of notes pouring from her enraptured soul.

"Winifred" is the affectionate tag given the huge Wurlitzer organ by Nalle, who refers to the instrument as "she" since he feels it is necessary to handle "her" with kid gloves to overcome her female temperament.

He had recorded the organ once before in 1964 when it was housed at the home of Richard (Dick) Weber, present operator of the Strand, while he resided in Schenectady.

Thursday was the actual recording day and Nalle's performance was being fed into a battery of recording equipment housed — oddly enough — in the theatre's ladies room!

Recording followed three days of preparatory work by the crew, assisted by Dick Weber, his brother Bob and Dick's wife, Audrey, technicians all.

Talking with Nalle prior to the cutting, we learned that he began playing the piano by ear at the age of four in his native Fort Myers, Florida.

His theatre organ training began in the Tampa Theatre when he was 18, and he went from there to Julliard School of Music in New York City.

His native State's drawl creeping

through, Nalle spoke enthusiastically of the renaissance of interest in the theatre organ which is going on throughout the country.

He is delighted that the theatre organ which he feels in the '20's was "so far ahead of its time" is coming back in many places besides the theatre.

Of music, Nalle says, "The best of pop music of today is as demanding as its classical counterpart."

He has no favorites, per se, but enjoys "a lot of music in almost every category."

What does he dislike?

"I dislike pretentious, busy music, which substitutes noise for telling a story."

"I prefer to play music in the popular and jazz categories, but I do play semi-classical and occasionally classical things plus improvising in different classical styles."

He has just such an "improvisation" concert coming up next April.

Unmarried "as yet," Nalle likes to travel; has been in the Far East, is a photography buff, and enjoys "listening to music" most of all.

He's impressed with the North Country; finds Plattsburgh "quaint," and compares the Adirondack Mountains from the air to his skyscraper home in New York, which he's dubbed "Casa Cielo" (Spanish for "home in the heavens").

The album will contain 12 numbers chosen by a Readers Digest research team, six recorded here, and the other six at the Senate Theatre in Detroit.

Time for a "take."

A voice from the ladies room announced "Only a Rose, take one," and Nalle began test runs.

Between takes, he and Producer Joe Habig listened, picked out the rough spots and he returned to the console for "takes" two, three and so on . . .

Between takes, Nalle remarked that he'd known the Weber brothers long before they were in the theatre field.

"These two together have the ability,



**SOUNDS FROM THE LADIES ROOM** — Ernie Oelrich (foreground) checks the balance while recording engineer Dave Philhower looks over Producer Joe Habig's shoulder at notations made during a "take."

the electrical and mechanical knowledge, along with musical perspective, that puts them among the few who can be called true geniuses."

Dick Weber, who has been a host to Nalle and company, commented, "You can't imagine the frustration we go through in going over this entire organ."

"I've lost 10 pounds in the last two weeks just preparing for this recording!"

As he spoke, "Only a Rose, take four" was in progress.

The "golden favorite" was about to become part of a record album.

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There is the "Golden Favorites" story from three separate viewpoints. Yet, we have heard only part of the story. Also of interest would be the producer's views, the recording engineer's, the guy who does the mastering (on that one and only Scully lathe, no doubt), the writer who prepares the jacket notes, the artist who conceives and creates the cover design for the jacket, and the creator of the promotion campaign. They all contribute to the success or failure of a record album or set.

However, the slice of the complex pie we have presented dealt with areas close to the heart of our hobby. We trust that it instructed as well as entertained. Our thanks to Mr. Nalle, Mr. Weber and Miss Bassett for the special degree of understanding we'll have while listening to "The Organ Plays Golden Favorites."

In our next issue we hope to relate some of the experiences of organist Richard Leibert during the taping of his portion of "Golden Favorites."

For more about the Wurlitzer organ in the Strand Theatre, Plattsburgh, New York, see the August 1967 issue of THEATRE ORGAN BOMBARDE for "A Family Affair."



**IT'S ALL OVER! I CAN RELAX!** — After the final take, Billy relaxes with the knowledge that he did his best to make the forthcoming grooves stylus-worthy. It's the console of the DTOC 4-34 Wurlitzer.