

The Ashley Miller Story

by Lloyd E. Klos

Rarely does this biographer find an organist who will spend several hours being interviewed — especially one whose schedule is so crushingly busy. However, in Ashley Miller, one finds a gentleman whose major criterion is helpfulness to his fellow man. We had been dogging Ashley for over a year, and when the opportunity presented itself on the day following his October 1968 concert in Rochester, he consented to spend time with the writer in reviewing his career.

Ashley B. Miller was born in Brooklyn of parents who were in show business. This, plus the gift of a toy piano at the tender age of three, instilled in him an early leaning toward music. When he was four, the family moved to Leonia, New Jersey, and at the age of six, he began piano study under Olive Lichtenberg. When seven, he heard his first organ, a 2-manual Austin, in church. About the same time, a movie theatre was built only a short distance from his home, and Ashley watched a 2-5 Kimball being installed. When it was ready, one of the installers asked "Want to try it, kid?" Although said in a jesting manner, Ashley was over the pit rail in a second and played his first theatre organ. He was hooked!

When the silents gave way to the talkies, this little beauty was stilled, and the theatre closed, but Ashley kept thinking of that organ. Later, the theatre reopened under new management, and he persuaded the manager to let him practice in return for playing the Saturday kiddie matinees.

Ashley first appeared before an adult audience when he was nine, having convinced the manager of the theatre in Englewood, New Jersey he could play the 3-manual Welte-Mignon. Hearing radio broadcasts featuring Ann Leaf, Fred Feibel and Dick Leibert solidified his organ interest.

In 1933, he was urged to study piano with Bruce Simonds in New York. Lessons were \$25 an hour, he recalls, though he was on a partial scholarship. He was attending high school in 1934, when he won a full scholarship in classical organ, theory and composition for study under Gaston Dethier at the Julliard School of Music for four years.

In 1938, he embarked for a summer of study under Tobias Matthay, the last piano student of Franz Liszt. Not the

Photos from the Klos Collection

type to waste time on the 10-day voyage, he made the acquaintance of the ship's wireless operator, "Sparks" and became adept at Morse Code. On the ship's radio, he first heard an English theatre organ, and while in London, wrote to Reginald Foort, who was broadcasting over the BBC on the 4-manual Compton at St. George's Hall (afterward destroyed in the London blitz). At St. George's, Foort gave him the opportunity to play the organ. In 1965 at the Music Trade Show in Chicago, Ashley had the opportunity to mention this to Reggie and thank him again for his kindness.

He returned to the States to attend the Julliard Graduate School, having been awarded a 3-year fellowship in conducting under the renowned Albert Stoessel. In his off-school time, he played at the IBM Exhibit at the New York World's Fair on a Hammond concert model. In 1939 and 1940, he played over WBNX in the Bronx on a 3-7 Kimball, serving as staff organist on several daytime shows and as pianist with the station's orchestra. It was during this time that his composition "Rhapsody For Strings" was published by BMI and premiered by Alfred Wallenstein and the WOR Symphonette. Ashley also gave concert recitals on WQXR, and again, after the war when he became organist for the Ethical Culture Society of New York.

On October 15, 1941, Private Ashley Miller entered the Army at Camp Upton, Long Island. In the fall of 1942, he was sent to Fort Myer, Virginia because of his excellent musical back-



At New York's St. Moritz Hotel. Ashley played here evenings while working daytime shift at the Music Hall in 1953.

ground, eventually attaining the rank of Chief Warrant Officer. Sent to Truax Field outside Madison, Wisconsin in late 1943, he led the 16th AAF Band. While there, Ashley had the opportunity to practice on a Barton organ in a Madison theatre which re-kindled his latent organ talent. A big event in Madison was a benefit premiere of Irving Berlin's film "This Is the Army," starring Ronald Reagan, Joan Leslie and Alan Hale, with the 16th AAF Band kicking off that War Bond Drive in front of the theatre, led by Warrant Officer Miller.

In 1945, he was stationed at Lubbock Field, Texas, and was responsible for the 636th AAF Band which engaged in some war bond tours.

He was honorably discharged from the AAF in 1946, and promptly wrote to Dick Leibert, Chief Organist at Radio City Music Hall, to audition for the position of Associate Organist. Ashley's mother, whose stage and radio name was Ethel Browning, had known Leibert in the pre-war years, and this didn't hurt the chances of the young musician who was bidding for the post.



Chief Warrant Officer Ashley Miller conducting the 16th AAF Band in August 1944 for the premiere of "This Is The Army", outside the Capitol Theatre in Madison, Wisconsin. He was stationed at Truax Field at this time.



Ashley plays for Easter Dawn Service for the Protestant Council at the Music Hall in 1961.

He was summoned for an audition on the studio 3-14 Wurlitzer. More than a bit nervous, he played "miserably", in his words, but regardless, Dick Leibert told him to report to play house closings for a week. He was then named Associate Organist whose job was to play on the staff's days off, as well as house closings. This fitted in with his schedule of attending daytime classes at Julliard under the G.I. Bill so as to earn his long-coveted degrees.

At the same time, he was appointed organist for the Ethical Culture Society of New York. He had auditioned for this post before the war, and was urged through periodic letters while in the service to accept this position upon discharge. In 1949, he was graduated from Julliard, and also passed the tests for the Associate Degree of the American Guild of Organists.

Ashley, due to a very busy schedule, had missed a couple closings at the Music Hall, and was dismissed. However, Raymond Paige, upon becoming Musical Director at the Hall in 1950, hired him as day man, and he became a staff organist. Shortly thereafter, Dick Leibert took a leave of absence, and Paige, heartily in favor of the organ's being used in conjunction with the orchestra as well as a solo instrument for breaks between shows, decided to feature Ashley in a special, if not unique, overture.

Paige believed Bach could be successfully presented to Music Hall audiences, and in a Bach Overture, Ashley was the single soloist in an orchestrated version of the famous "Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor." For six weeks, seven days a week, and four shows daily, the celebrated 58-rank Wurlitzer sounded off in a manner few have ever been privileged to hear. (Ashley found especial use for the 12 ranks of mixtures on this unusual theatre organ).

As if this weren't enough, he played pop-style breaks on the left console before dashing — while the newsreel was on — to the right console for the feature spot.

In 1953, he had an engagement at New York's St. Moritz Hotel, playing nightly on a Hammond, in addition to his daytime chores at the Music Hall. This fellow has never been idle! At this time, his first recordings on the Music Hall organ were pressed. New recording techniques enabled engineers to capture the dynamic range of the "King of Instruments", and the Columbia technicians, plus the Miller artistry, turned out sheer masterpieces which are collectors' items today. (They may shortly be re-issued).

In January 1956, the desire to do other things musically, and to do freelance work, caused him to leave the Music Hall. He began an engagement at the New York Park-Sheraton Hotel that year on a Hammond, and in the 1958-59 season, he formed his own trio — organ, guitar and drums.

From that time forward, this little giant of the console has had a busy ten

years. Club dates on electronics, occasional subs at the Music Hall, concerts at Carnegie Hall and Town Hall with leading symphony orchestras, recording sessions for Columbia and Command Records involving the Music Hall and New York Paramount organs, TV dates for background music — you name it, Ashley's done it. He is a great favorite of ATOE audiences, having played before them on the Wurli-Morton in the San Francisco Orpheum Theatre, the Kimball in the Los Angeles Wiltern Theatre, the Wurlitzers in Dunedin, Florida, Detroit and Rochester; and the Capitol Theatre Moller in Rome, N. Y. He continues as organist at the Ethical Culture Society in New York, after a brief leave of absence in 1960.

His published arrangements for organ have further enhanced his reputation as an imaginative creator, and he used one from his "Continental Favorites" folio, playing it note for note on his limited edition album recorded for the Detroit Theater Organ Club. In 1965, he played on the Jack Paar show, serving a dual role as assistant conductor for Jose Melis. More recently, he became organist for the CBS soap opera "Search For Tomorrow", beginning in January 1969.

He says: "The Theatre Organ means different things to different people. To many, it is the old Jesse Crawford style or the newer George Wright sound. To me, it is all that plus Billy Nalle and Johnny Seng. Theatre Organ style is a medium of total expression and not limited to the old."

Thus has been the fantastically successful career of Ashley B. Miller. There shouldn't be one theatre organ enthusiast who has not heard this fine musician, either through his recordings, or in person. Extremely critical of his performances, greatly modest, and a gentleman of polished character, that is Ashley Miller, the organists' organist.



Ashley Miller confers with Associate Organist Ray Bohr at the Music Hall in the fall of 1950, shortly after Ashley was appointed as regular day organist.