

CHICAGO'S RADIO THEATRE PIPE ORGANS

Pipe Dreams, Chicago, U. S. A.

by L. R. Clarke



The WENR 3-13 Wurlitzer in Studio A.



Dean Fossler, organist for "Amos and Andy" from 1931-1942. Theme originated from Studio A after NBC purchased WENR.

The Civic Opera Building. WENR studios were on the 42nd floor.



Irma Glen played up to 32 shows a week as organist for WENR and WMAQ.

The phenomenal success of the silent movies and the organist in the pit was one reason why in the early days of radio most stations considered organ music of prime importance in their daily schedule.

Almost from the very beginning of radio, any new station looked for facilities to broadcast organ music. There was keen competition for the increasing demand of theatre organs, and most manufacturers maintained studios which were used for organ sales and instructions and broadcasting. These organs were often used by radio stations who eventually acquired their own.

From a 1922 survey, only 20,000 radio sets existed in the Chicago area; and a Chicago Tribune survey in 1924 indicated more than 100,000 sets were in use. By 1925, there were some forty stations broadcasting in this area; also, 20 groups were still waiting for a license. The stations were growing fast, and by 1930 the survivors were relatively few. Of these, most are with us today.

From early hours to midnight, many stations scheduled their share of organ music: "Al Carney at the wonder Kilgen Organ," an early hour request program where a listener could hear his name over the air if his request was played; popular melodies from "The Rialto" in Joliet on the 4-22 Barton before the first feature; Irma Glen recalls playing 32 shows a week, mostly 15-minute programs.

We also had broadcasts from various theatres while the silent movie was viewed by theatre patrons. It was a popular feature. At first, the change in mood had a strange effect on the movie patrons; but, when they realized they were now "on the air," they enjoyed the 15- to 60-minute interlude.

In the late 20's, WBBM had a direct line to the Chicago Theatre with which it was able to pick up "Jesse Crawford at the Organ." Arsene Siegel well remembered the time he was playing from a prepared score — the Lead sheet — to a silent movie and knew the composer was in the theatre. When the time for broadcasting arrived, Arsene changed to the music scheduled. The composer, running down the aisle, demanded to know what Arsene thought he was doing.

Other broadcasts: Herbert Foote from the Marine Dining Room in the Edgewater Beach Hotel; Moody Bible Institute (Station WMBI) dinner hour programs, not necessarily somber church music but religious, nevertheless, and presented with such an interesting flair which made listening a pleasure.



Al Melgard at the second Barton that was installed in the WBBM studios. This replaced the smaller Barton moved from the Stewart Warner Building.



Sunday was the day for the Singing Canaries. Wilson Doty at the 3-9 Wurlitzer which replaced the Barton at left.

It seems we always had "Amos & Andy"; Jesse Crawford usually followed. At the close of day, we could pick up Mary Elizabeth Hicks from the Paramount in Nashville when "You and the Night and the Music" always ushered in this talented musician. Moon River came over WLW with Lee Erwin at the studio Wurlitzer. His theme, "Caprice Viennois," was a suitable ending for a day's listening.

In 1924, WGN took over station WDAP "atop the Drake Hotel." Of the various programs it acquired, one was the Barton Organ program, originating from the Barton Studio in the Mallers Bldg., with Ralph Emerson as the featured organist.

Like many other stations, WGN soon purchased its own organ . . . a 2-7 Wurlitzer which was originally considered a backup (or support) to the Goldkette band, a very popular program at that time. Larry Larsen was the first WGN staff organist. He was followed by Len Salvo, who remained for 13 years.

In 1925, in another radio station (now headquartered in the Stewart Warner Bldg. on West Diversey) we find an installation of two grand pianos and a Barton organ. "WBBM" was just a bunch of letters according to Ralph Atlas, one of the owners. Others believed it stood for "World's Best Broadcasting Medium."

WBBM continued to grow and soon moved to the Wrigley Bldg., complete with the same Barton organ. Between the Stewart Warner Bldg. and the Wrigley Bldg., WBBM used facilities in the Kimball Bldg. where any number of Kimballs were available. Al Melgard dedicated the organ in the Stewart Warner Bldg. and in the Wrigley Bldg. He remained in the Wrigley Bldg. studios until 1931 when he went to the Chicago Stadium where he is playing the organ in 1969.

Organist Wilson Doty took over at WBBM and developed a dislike for the

small Barton. Doty convinced management that it could use a better organ. With the aid of his good friend and organ technician, Art Templer, he located a 3-9 Wurlitzer which they purchased and installed for \$5,000. Previously, this organ had been used in the Gunn School of Music. The Barton Organ Company removed the Barton and promptly sold it. Meantime, while the Wurlitzer was being installed at WBBM, daily programs were "picked up" from one of the many organ studios at the Chicago Musical College. These studios were complete with a movie screen. Here many a theatre organ music student got his start playing to the silent flicker.

Radio pipe organs played a very important part in the daily life of station activities. Sometimes they performed the impossible. For example, one day Norm Sherr, a well-known pianist on WBBM returned from a visit in Missouri with several gallons of bootleg corn whiskey. Remembering stories how whiskey aging was accelerated by the constant movement of a long ocean voyage, Sherr and Wilson Doty tied several jugs to the top of the tremolo. Every time the organ was used, the whiskey got a good shaking. It is difficult to say if it helped; regardless, it is said, "It was darned good whiskey!"

The theatre organist had many faithful fans, and it was not unusual for the organist to see familiar faces in the first rows probably paying more attention to him than the movie on the screen. This fact became evident when the "Maro Oil" company sponsored a 15-minute program on WBBM. The owner, "a little old lady," had been a great fan of Eddie Hause in the days of silent movies. Eddie was her idol — all other organists were amateurs according to her — and she insisted that he be hired to play the theme. Usually, the sponsor cared little who played the theme, but Eddie Hause became staff organist for WBBM. It was cheaper for WBBM to hire him as staff organist than to pay him for the one show.

After Eddie Hause, Milton Charles joined WBBM in 1936. He was quite surprised that the organ was the same instrument on which he taught in the Gunn School of Music. This organ, prior to being moved to WBBM, gave experience to many Gunn students who played extemporaneous programs for WMAQ's noon broadcasters. This was a customary practice; students were glad to get the experience, and the radio station was pleased to get the free entertainment.

Many remember the Sunday programs of the Singing Canaries. This was usually the job of the Sunday relief organist. WBBM had the 3-Vees program; and, soon after, WGN moved into its new studios on North Michigan Ave., adjacent to the Tribune Tower, from which the "Hartz Mountain" program was aired.

The new and larger facility of WGN costing \$600,000 "was built adventurously in the middle of the great depression."

For the new studios, W. W. Kimball Co. sold WGN management on a new pipe organ. WGN listened to its organist, Len Salvo, who definitely was opposed to the idea. A happy solution resulted. The present pipes were to remain and Kimball was to add three new ranks; namely, Open Diapason, English Horn and Trumpet, also a Harp Celeste and a Vibraharp. The new console would be 3-manual, and the organ would be installed in its own studio. The new studio, with its high ceiling, had exceptionally good acoustics. The console was of Korina wood, and a turquoise drape hung from ceiling to floor behind it. The grillwork matched the console. Although rather plain, it was in very good taste and a most attractive studio.

A second console was also furnished by Kimball. This was finished in ebony and installed on stage in Studio 1 . . . the WGN Radio Theatre. Use of the second console was extremely limited.

The theatre audience could not hear the organ. Only the radio listener could hear the organ music mixed with the orchestra by the control room. Strange as it may seem, the organist also heard it the same way. He was required to wear earphones and heard the organ only after the control room blended it with the orchestra. The time delay was too great, and this procedure was very shortly discontinued. The console was removed and returned to the Kimball factory where it was placed in a crate. It would be interesting to know where it is today. Fortunately, it was sold before the big fire.

One day, Mr. W. W. Kimball decided to stop manufacturing pipe organs and issued orders to remove and burn all consoles on hand. These plus many associated parts were moved outside to an open area. They had quite a bonfire that Saturday morning. Monday morning the plant foreman expressed great displeasure, saying that the neighbors could have made good use of the wood for kindling. So ended the Kimball era of organ manufacturing.

Prior to the use of transcriptions, etc., on radio, we usually found a relief organist on duty Sundays. Although he might be required to play brief programs, his name was seldom mentioned. As usual, Sunday was the day for the Canaries. To the accompaniment of suitable organ music, the airwaves were filled with the song of happy, healthy Hartz Mountain-fed canaries. If they did not chirp, it became a personal insult to the organist whose job it was to play that day. The Sunday relief job was usually a thankless one. It was

required that he must be in the studio ready to fill in on a second's notice. This was especially true during a national hookup.

One fall Sunday, the relief organist was Gabe Wellner. He had played for the canaries in the morning; they did not feel much like singing, and he knew he would hear about it. That afternoon, a football game was being broadcast from the West Coast, and he was compelled to sit at the console, or at least be in the actual studio, during the entire game. Gabe Wellner was at the console, fighting boredom playing a few notes here and there and, as usual, eating his share of chocolate-covered nuts from a large bag next to him on the organ bench. With a gesture of complete disgust, the quick sweep of his right hand removed all of the music from the rack. No sooner had he made this move and as the many sheets floated to the studio floor, the "On the Air" light turned red. Startling as it was, it said only one thing "You are on Coast to Coast."

Immediately, Gabe swung into a march suitable for the occasion. He had played only a few bars when his memory began to play tricks, and he suddenly realized that he needed the music which by now had settled to the studio floor. Desperately, he mouthed the word "RED" to indicate that he needed the red copy on the floor. While it was found and placed on the organ in a matter of a few seconds, it seemed like a lifetime. Meanwhile, a few strange bars had been added to a well-known march.

By 1946, several changes had taken place at WGN. Len Salvo had moved west for greener pastures and Preston Sellers became staff organist. Harold Turner, WGN staff pianist, well known for his superb style, was in the Navy at the time. Returning in 1945 as staff pianist, he was offered the position of staff organist a year later which he eagerly accepted. He is still the staff organist today.

The remodeling of the WGN station in 1947 necessitated the organ's move to Studio 6B in the Tribune Tower. Here, complete with its own echo chamber, it remained in first-class condition. To match the decor of the new studio, the top and sides of the console were finished in ebony. The fact that it was installed in a general purpose studio found it seldom used.

One of the first televised organ programs originated here and featured Leon Berry at the console. While camera technicians were in the chamber, they attempted to show the TV audience the working parts and where the various sounds originate.

Also during this time, Chicago area listeners were enjoying the programs from another radio station, namely WENR. The "Garden Studio" on the 32nd floor of the Strauss Bldg., on South Michigan Avenue, was equipped with a 3-manual Wurlitzer. With the completion of the new Civic Opera Bldg., WENR moved to new studios on the 42nd floor. An unusually large studio, ideal for a pipe organ installation, was equipped with a new 3-13

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The WGN Kimball console in the original organ studio, Studio 3, adjacent to the Tribune Tower. Three Kimball ranks were added to the station's original 7 rank Wurlitzer.



Harold Turner at the WGN Kimball in Studio B in the Tribune Tower. The console was refinished in ebony when the organ was moved from Studio 3 in 1947.