

THE FABULOUS 'BEER CAN' ORGAN

Story by Stu Green

Art Stopes has led a colorful life, by any man's standards, and especially those of organ enthusiasts. His entire life, since the age of 15 has been dominated by pipe organs — and he's still going strong.

Art got his "baptism of fire" when he was apprenticed to the Aeolian Organ Co., in Garwood, New Jersey, just after his 15th birthday. He was with Aeolian for two years, observing and absorbing the many skills required in organ building. Then he joined the New York division of the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company, a firm rich with installation contracts in the New York area, and between 1925 and 1928 Art worked on so many Wurlitzer organ installations that the years are recalled as one long pipe-happy blur of organ parts being assembled in lofts smelling of new plaster and seasoned wood.



Art Stopes today — still a pixie.

Came "Vitaphone" — Poof!

With theatre organs no longer in demand, Art went to work for Estey in New York as an installer, tonal finisher and maintenance man. Then the big adventure — installation of the 4-55 rank behemoth in the Atlantic City Auditorium, truly the world's largest organ.

Between 1930 and 1934, Art Stopes was on the Midmer-Losh Organ Company's payroll and most of that time he spent as a member of the crew which installed, finished and maintained the huge beast in that famed New Jersey convention hall. And so it was, and still is — pipe organs all his life.

Photo Copying by Bill Lamb

But if one were to ask Art about the adventure which stands out in bold relief as the most memorable, he'll answer without hesitation, "my beer can organ!"

The year was 1942 and Art was installing an organ in a Philadelphia church. It had to be ready for a dedication concert the next day and time was running short. Finally it was all set except for one bass 8-foot Open Diapason display pipe which remained to be put in its place on the front casework chest.

Art jostled the long, slim pipe into position and noted with dismay that it was too long; it failed to clear the ceiling. Looking closer, Art noticed that there was something wrong with the pipe; it had been made too long for its pitch. Meanwhile the organist and members of the organ committee were getting impatient. No time to do it scientifically, thought Art, I'll just use rule of thumb and saw it off here.

Trouble was, the excision included the tuning roll near the end of the open pipe, leaving no way to tune it. His guess proved correct; he had cut in the right place. But how was he going to tune it? It needed length, enough to allow lowering the pitch down to a "zero beat" with other pipes of the same pitch.

No possibility of mitering the pipe with a piece of the part removed; it was a display pipe which had to fit the casework. Then he remembered seeing a quart beer can in a vacant lot down the street. A beer can? Well, why not? No one would ever know. He rescued the can from the ignominy of being drained and deserted on a city street and put it where it provides, to this day, a healthy assist to the organ in singing praises of the Lord. With the top removed, the can was positioned inside the pipe, open end down, just below the sawed-off pipe end. There was air passage around it, after it had been suspended inside the pipe by securing it with lengths of soldered wire, so it might be said Art gave the pipe the "Haskell*" treatment.

*Inventor of a method of getting the effect of added length to an open pipe by inserting a smaller pipe (suspended with clearance all around) inside it. The smaller pipe was capped at the top.

Now the organist could practice his selections for the morrow and the organ committee members need never know that a lowly beer can was making it possible.

The incident got Art Stopes to thinking about beer cans and organs. Perhaps these beer cans had special qualities which merited further investigation. He wondered how the plated ferrous metal from which they are stamped would compare with pipe metal tonally. Tone from beer cans? You've gotta be out of your skull, Art Stopes!

The idea not only persisted but developed. Soon Art knew that he was going to build some sort of a wind-blown instrument, and the music would come from beer cans!

Being a craftsman, Art Stopes first prepared drawings. He decided that the instrument should be self-contained but portable. His final design had it in two pieces which, when assembled, comprised the instrument. When apart, the two sections would fit into two padded crates for transportation. But we are ahead of our story.

He started assembling parts — beer cans! Remember, that the war years and early post-war years were not eras with plentiful supplies of beer cans. But, somehow, Art managed to accrue a good supply — with many labels. When asked if he also consumed the contents of all the cans he acquired, Art is mute. But ask him why he selected beer cans and he'll reply, "Who would want to eat over 200 cans of tomatoes just to build a tin can organ?"

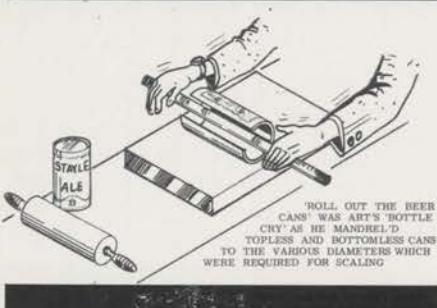
The horsetrading that goes on without surcease among pipe organ enthusiasts brought in many of the "traditional parts he needed, a 61-note manual from a junked organ, a 1½x2-foot regulator, a tiny Estey "egg beater" tremulant, a small blower for 115 vac operation — and still more beer cans.

The most important decision had to do with the choice of pipework. How many ranks could he cram into the super-melodeon he had designed? The area available for pipes wouldn't stretch, so Art decided on one super rank — a "Vox Tincanna" as one wag described it at the time.

An organ with only one rank? Would anyone listen to an organ with only one rank? There was evidence that they would. Even in those days, American concert organists were trying to out-shout one another in praise of the revived "Cro-Magnon" instruments with which the ancients had to be satisfied because there wasn't anything better — the "chiffy" Portative, which very early musicians powered with a blacksmith's bellows!

Then there was the calliope — free-standing, unenclosed octaves of whistles which charmed grandpa at the 1906 Chenango County fair, if he wasn't closer than a half mile. These "steamers" were so loud that their lack of tonal variety was never noticed. But that was so long ago. Wasn't there a more modern example of a successful one-stop organ. Why sure there was — the new-fangled electric organ they played on the radio for the "Ma Perkins" show and "John's Other Wife." Why that clock company had made a fortune from an organ-like instrument which pumped out flute sounds no matter which voice was switched on. That settled it; a one-stop organ it would be!

The big project was fabricating the pipes. Space available didn't allow for large or heavy pipes, so Art selected the slight "scale 46" Violin Diapason as a model. But first every beer can had to be made "topless" and "bottomless." The remaining cylinder was then rolled to the size required for the particular diameter of the pipe being fabricated. Depending on length, pipes required up to ten beer cans carefully joined by solder. In all, Art Stopes



made 73 open-topped, precisely scaled pipes from beer cans, the larger ones consuming up to 8 hours each to make. The largest "can" pipe sounded Tenor C and can be seen in the exact center of the display pipes. The project consumed 270 beer cans. That accounts for a lot of beer, too!

The photograph also shows a set of pedals, a total of twelve. For this octave, Art faced a problem. The thin walls of a beer can are not suitable for handling bass tones. He remembered the high-priced sets of pipes made of paper-thin metal with which clever European pipemakers love to "stick" gullible American organ committees, pipes which shake, rattle and go "off speech," until reinforcing metal bands are clamped around each node on the lower-pitched ones. Art decided to play it safe and used an octave of wooden Stopped Flute pipes (8' C to Tenor C) for the bottom octave on the manual and the pedal octave.

As the pipework started to take shape, the builder considered unification. What pitches should he include to get the most variety from his one rank? With the limited air supply available from the lightweight blower, a "Tenor C" 16' manual unification, bringing in the lower octave of larger pipes, could leave the little organ gasping for breath. But he could unify upwards with no trouble because of the diminishing wind supply demands as pitches ascend. Again, he thought of how much variety that very popular brand of electric organ obtained through borrowed mutation stops. He finally came up with the following specifications:

Pedal

Belch 8'
Urp Schlitzer 4'

Manual from 8' C to mid. B

Moltenhopzhorn 8'
Blatzfloete 4'
Quartz 2 2/3'
Pintadena 2'

Manual from mid. C upward (5 octaves)

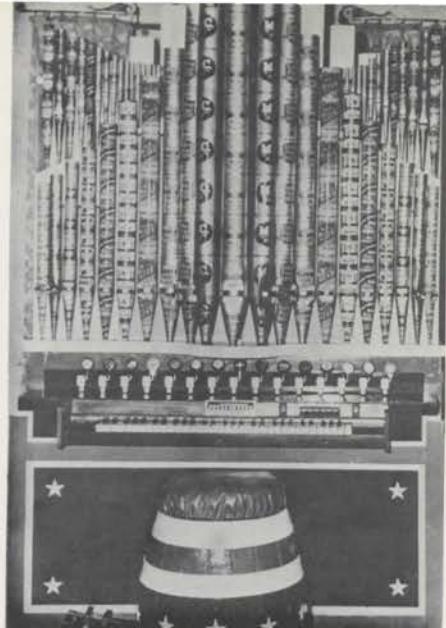
Buschvarian Bourdon 8'
Guzzelina 5 1/3'
Bungohhofloete 4'
Schaumbier Sackbut 2 2/3'
Foamette 2'
Schlitzflute Tierce 1 3/4'
Viol d' Falstaff 1'
Uno Rankett 1/2'

These voices were controlled by spigot handles above the manuals. Despite the fancy stop names, the sound was all Violin Diapason, with a slight hiccup instead of chiff. Only the pitch was different.

Art Stopes faced another problem which his mechanical virtuosity solved easily. Being a self-taught musician, Art knows all his tunes in the Key of C. So many times he had been embarrassed when he sat down at the keyboard to accompany a singer only to learn that the singer had to have it in something like D flat. A deceptively simple switching system between the manual key contacts and the unification switches solved that problem. It was operated by a "transposition lever" just above the manual which moved the key action to line up at any of 12 positions. This device allowed Art to play in any of the 12 keys by a flick of the wrist — instant musicianship!

What about a chamber? After considering the merits of expression versus the weight and bulk of a swell box, Art decided to "go for baroque" and leave his picturesque pipework unenclosed. Anyway, it would have been a shame to hide his "pop art" pipe decoration from public scrutiny.

The action chosen was electro-pneumatic, same as any standard theatre organ. Art built the chest to mount the pipes compactly in the best possible display pattern. His low voltage dc power came from a rectifier.



THE FABULOUS 'VOX TINCANNA' — Self-contained, it came apart just above the spigot/stops for shipment in two large cases. The keg/bench was wired to give the departing organist a somewhat thirsty coda (see text).

The bottom octave Stopped Flute was the most massive pipework on the instrument and provided a solid pedal bass at 8' and 4'. The one tremulant affected all the pipework, which extended for two octaves beyond top C at the high end of the manual. This, as any unification buff knows, was to accommodate the 4' and higher unifications up where there weren't any 8' keys to play them.

Art spent three years of spare time assembling his instrument, 1943 through 1946. Once his oddball organ had been assembled, voiced, and the "bugs" removed, Art Stopes found representatives of the entertainment and newspaper worlds banging on his door. There followed an article in the Philadelphia "Inquirer" which described the amazing musical instrument. Personal appearances offers started to roll in and Art soon found himself in "show biz" — weddings, picnics, bar mitzvahs — any place where Art could plug his wheezer into 115 volts ac.

The "beer can organ" was written up in such unrelated magazines as Etude and Popular Mechanics during 1946, while Art was playing engagements in lodge halls, ballrooms, clubs, school auditoriums and commercial theatres. Perhaps the "sudser's" crowning moments were achieved during a coast-to-coast CBS broadcast when Art and his tuned cans performed "Roll Out the Barrel" on "Hobby Lobby."

But all of this show biz jazz was a sideline for Art. By trade he was now an aviation layout mechanic. Yet, the earlier years spent in the world of pipe organs had left their mark and doing a stint at a club with his two huge cases of whistles fascinated Art for several

years and provided a much-needed outlet from the humdrum of everyday living. In fact, the beer can organ enjoyed a life of more than ten years, on and off.

During the same period Art did a stint with the Austin Organ Company as assistant sales and service rep in Virginia, a job which saw him doing considerable maintenance and installation work. Between 1953 and 1959 he did the same for the Wicks Organ Company, first in Virginia and later in Florida where he lives now. While he was thus engaged Art Stopes was honored by the American Academy of Organ with a Charter Membership in the organization and a Certificate of Merit "for services rendered the community through organ music." No reference to Art's beer can organ was made by representatives of the Academy when they conferred these honors, but we'll wager there were a few chuckles among the dignitaries who knew.

In recent years Art became interested in electronics and took a correspondence course which won him diplomas, first in radio and television engineering and later in TV servicing. Now he's taken up "do-it-yourself" aviation and is building a "Volmer Jensen 22," a 2-place amphibian plane, a new twist which came about when he joined the Experimental Aircraft Association. Art Stopes is the kind of guy who always seeks new challenges, yet never forgets the old ones — like the beer can organ.

What finally became of it?

Alas, the beer can organ is no more! When Art tired of his "show biz" sideline he found himself accepting fewer and fewer engagements. The beer can organ's final gasp in public was heard during a performance at the Florida theatre, Jacksonville, in the early '50s. After that, the two large packing crates were stored in Richmond, Va., where, after a few years of inactivity, the instrument was scrapped. Thus ends the saga of the beer can organ.

Yet, in retrospect, Art Stopes looks back on the years of barnstorming with his "refugee from a brewery" as the most colorful of a varied career. And no one who ever sat down to play the beer can organ would ever forget what took place when he got up from the padded beer keg which served as a stool; even though no hands were near the manual, the organ would bid "adieu" with a chorus of "How Dry I Am." Art had wired a switch into the keg stool which activated a motor-driven cam programmed to play the tune when the player left the stool. Somewhere he had heard the old vaudeville motto, "Leave 'em laughing!"

Closing Chord

JAMES ALLEN ORCUTT

Jim Orcutt knew he had to play organ by the time he was 15, after hearing the 3-11 Kimball in the Empress theatre, Anchorage, Alaska, where the Orcutt family was then living. Jim later came south and gravitated to Chicago where he played plug-ins in cocktail bars for 10 years. There was also a four year period as pianist with a dance band which took him to "just about every town in the mid-west with a population of at least 20,000" said Jim. He is best remembered as the organist who won the audition held to select an organist for the Cathedral of the Christian Crusade, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Jim's home town (see the August 1967 THEATRE ORGAN BOMBARDE). Jim was first on the list and played the ten-rank Robert Morton theatre organ installed in the church's broadcast auditorium so appealingly that the selection of Jim by the music committee was made without their hearing the others on the list. But Jim was the nervous type. He just couldn't stay put. A year after his appointment in Tulsa, he showed up in Hollywood, playing a Hammond in a rather sleazy bar. That didn't last long because Jim decided to return to Tulsa and resume his church organ work and also take a job selling

electronics in Tulsa. By then he was deeply in debt and tried "moonlighting" in an attempt to catch up. It proved too much for him and a breakdown landed him in the hospital for several months. Shortly after his release, he told the BOMBARDE only three weeks before his death, he married a long-time friend, a gal he had known for many years. There was a brief session as a dance band pianist and Jim returned to Hollywood, "this time to



stay." But he didn't stay. He dropped from sight and even at the bar where he was supposed to start playing a plug-in they didn't know what had become of him. He had been offered a playing job in Butte, Montana, and was probably on his way there when he was taken ill. We received word from his mother that he had passed away in Warm Springs, Montana, after a very short illness. He was 36. Interment was at Coweta, Oklahoma, near the Orcutt family home. Ironically, his first pipe platter for Concert Recording is in release.

FRANK D. ROGERS

Born in Helena, Montana in May 1888, Frank Rogers came to the West Coast in the early days of the century. In 1906 he started his lifelong love affair with the pipe organ by getting a job at the Marshall Bennett Organ Co. (Spokane) as an apprentice during summer vacations. It was a very necessary step; he needed the money to pay tuition for his last two years at Whitman College in Walla Walla. He graduated in 1908, with honors in both piano and organ. The theatre organ age was already making faint rumbles; the first use of an organ to accompany films which Frank recalled was at the Mike Gore theatre at 3rd and Main in Los Angeles. It was a small Estey roll player located behind the box office so the cashier could change the rolls. That was in 1906.

Upon his graduation from college, he started doing organ maintenance work for Bennett in Spokane. One of his assignments was a 7-rank Estey in the Klemmer Theatre, often played by a quiet young lad named Jesse Crawford. Then he moved south and got a job with the Robert Morton Co. in Van Nuys, California which covered the span 1913 to 1918, and completed Frank's education in the mechanics of organ building. Then he met a man



GALLONS OF THE GOLDEN FLUID are represented by Art's handiwork. Tops of the bottom-octave wooden Bass Flute pipes can be seen behind the inspired facade of onetime "empties". Wind pressure: 4". Controls for the "instant transposer" are directly above Art's left hand. No, the "M.C." doesn't stand for Marr & Colton, this time.