



# LETTERS

*Letters to the Editor concerning all aspects of the theatre organ hobby are encouraged. Send them to the editor concerned. Unless it's stated clearly on the letter "not for publication," the editors feel free to reproduce it, in whole or part.*

Address: P. O. Box 2329

Livonia, Michigan 48150

Mr. Editor,

I found the article by Mr. John Muri in the October TOB ("The American Theatre Organ as a Part of American Culture") very interesting and I appreciate many of his observations and opinions. Yet, there was a glaring omission which damages Mr. Muri's perspective, and ours. The author showed great enthusiasm for console artists of the "learned" school, those capable of correctly playing big overtures and orchestral transcriptions (often along with the pit orchestra) as specialties. He exhibits considerable reverence for such remembered names as Firmen Swinnen, Dr. Mauro-Cottone, Arthur Dunham and Albert Hay Malotte — all men with ties to the "straight," or concert organ.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not against the "uplift" one might experience on hearing a slice of von Suppe well played as a spotlight solo. But, in connection with his chosen few, Mr. Muri didn't even mention the main purpose of the theatre organ — to supply musical accompaniments for silent films.

I heard two of the organists on Mr. Muri's preferred list many years ago. They were playing huge, thunderous concert organs in Broadway theatres (I'll wager they personally designed the big straight Esteys, Austins and Mollers which were installed in too many top houses.) These organists were very impressive soloists but I was always amused when another organist appeared to accompany the picture. Even then I suspected that the soloist might not know much about film accompaniments, or didn't want to soil his hands with them.

I used to attend the New York Piccadilly where a much-advertised British organist named Herbert Henderson was being spotlighted. He was impressive enough during solos, but he also played

the movie accompaniment sometimes. I might never have known how "wooden" and dull his picture music was if it hadn't been for a little fat guy with a mop of white hair, one of Henderson's assistants, named Pat Foster. Foster made a film come alive so it seemed like an entirely different movie when he played. He was a real specialist and I don't think he lasted very long at the Piccadilly, giving the star all that competition.

I had a similar experience on the West Coast. Henry Murtagh was a fine soloist organist who probably belonged in a concert hall rather than a theatre. But when his solo was over, picture music specialist Ernie Hunt took over the console. Ernie was largely self taught, a terrific improviser (or "faker"). He had a great musical imagination and had memorized hundreds of themes, perhaps thousands. Yet, it was said that he could barely read music. Yet his exceptional film accompaniments even drew the plaudits of Murtagh, who was rather poor at cueing.

My point is that we shouldn't necessarily worship at the shrine of the spotlight soloist who would probably have been more comfortable in a concert hall, playing a traditional organ. Not at the expense of scores of unsung but tremendously effective picture players who possessed skills and talents the soloists could only wonder at. Let's hear something about them, Mr. Muri.

Lionel R. Johnson  
Riverhead, New York

**(We'll wager a guess, too—that the Pat Foster referred to was really Paul H. Forster who played at the Piccadilly before going to the Syracuse, N. Y. Empire (see "Nuggets from the Golden Days"). All of which should give ATOSer Forster a chuckle or two when he reads it. —Ed.)**

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Mr. Editor,

I enjoyed John Muri's article on the American Theatre Organ until the very end, when he described a concert during which a United States flag was lowered from the loft (like scenery) to climax the performance. Doesn't Mr. Muri know that this device was commonly used to bolster weak acts in vaudeville days, a gimmick which insured applause no matter how bad the act? Performers looked down on colleagues who resorted to what they called "hokum." Perhaps even the dull-est clod couldn't escape the power of hokum but I disagree with Mr. Muri when he says our culture needs that kind of "inspiration" today.

Randall Whitman  
Philadelphia, Pa.

Editor

THEATRE ORGAN Magazine

Dear Sir:

Gee, Dad, it's a Wurlitzer!

The instrument in the photo of Loew's United Artists Theatre in Louisville which appeared in the last issue as Number 17 in Bill Peterson's fascinating series, "An Acre of Seats in a Palace of Splendor," is tabbed in the Wurlitzer Installation List as Number 1689, a Style 235 Special, shipped from North Tonawanda on April 13, 1928. It was restored in 1965 by Jim Wingate, who played it regularly until he moved to New York to become a valued member of our chapter. The organ is still in the theatre and is highly prized by the management.

Seated at the console in the photograph is an itinerant calliapist named Jay Quinby who had jumped ship in Louisville and temporarily forsaken the stentorian charms of the *Delta Queen's* steam piano for the more refined tones of the United Artists Unit Orchestra.

How do I know? Gee, Dad, I took the picture.

Sincerely,  
Ben M. Hall

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Gentlemen:

On page 17 of the August issue about Chicago Radio Pipe Organs, you had one line on a 4 manual Page installed at W H T.

When W H T ceased operation, the organ was moved and installed in the Michigan Theatre, Flint, Michigan, which was about an 1800 seat house. The organ was opened on April 25, 1929 by Banks Kennedy. Bob Howland of Romeo, Michigan removed the organ in 1959 and after a re-leathering job, due to water damage, installed it in his home. Again in 1966 the organ was moved, this time to my home in Birmingham, where it is now being installed.

The original specifications were for a 4 manual 15 rank organ. We have now added a string, an orchestral oboe which replaces a synthetic oboe, and a piano — bringing it to 17 ranks. This organ is a twin to the 4/15 Page installed in the Embassy Theatre, Fort Wayne, Indiana and played by Buddy Nolan. The Embassy organ was featured in the Fall 1964 issue of Theatre Organ about one of Buddy's concerts.

Sincerely,  
James N. Widdis

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