

What Ever Became of

Mary Jean Miller

The girl blossomed briefly on pipes over NBC in the early '50s, and then was heard no more on the networks. Yet, her fans remembered . . .

Announcer Hugh Downs looked at his watch, then gazed around the somewhat cluttered studio. His eyes came to focus on the studio clock, which he noted was nearly a minute ahead of his watch, then moved to a shopworn pipe organ console on the far side of the studio. He caught the eye of the organist, a handsome woman in her early 40's, and gave the hand signal which indicates "one minute to air time."

The organist ceased shuffling through the music on the well-worn music rack and set up combinations on the three manuals of the venerable studio Wurlitzer for her program theme. As the big second hand on the studio clock moved up toward the hour, both artist and announcer automatically turned their eyes toward the control room where the producer butted out his cigarette, raised his right hand high and, when the second hand passed the hour, brought the hand down to point at the organist.

The strains of Edward MacDowell's "To a Waterlily" filled the studio. When the theme had been established, the producer gave the "fade-down, -and-continue-under-speech" hand signal. The music continued softly as Hugh Downs made the familiar announcement without referring to his script:

"Good morning. Welcome to the fifty-second Sunday presentation of 'Morning Serenade' with Mary Jean Miller at the console of the WMAQ studio organ in the Merchandise Mart, Chicago." Again the delicate strains of "Waterlily" filled the studio and the NBC network's Sunday listeners were treated to 15 minutes of music appropriate to the day and hour. The style was brisk and light. The standard selections were registered as such while the "pops" were given a theatrical twist. A solid classical foundation showed through even the popular selections. Obviously, the gal was at home in either idiom.

Neither organist nor announcer could know then that the program, which had been building in popularity during the year 1951, would never see a second anniversary. For reasons understood



The organist plugs her own arrangements of Stephen Foster tunes during a broadcast from Chicago Merchandise Mart studio.

only in the higher echelons of communications media the popular radio show was cancelled after 64 weeks, never to reappear. For that matter, the organ didn't survive either. It is long gone from the studio.

But the program and organist were not forgotten. From time to time this publication received inquiries, infrequent but persistent, which asked:

"What ever became of Mary Jean?"

After a couple of years of this, we felt moved to look into the matter. Queries to radio stations in Chicago all brought the same reply; she was remembered, but they didn't know where she was now. One suggested that Mary Jean was Irma Glen, doing a little moonlighting. But Irma Glen wasn't active in Chicago radio in the early '50s. The mystery deepened.

To further throw us off the track, a former employee of a Wausau, Wisconsin bank reported that long before the "Morning Serenade" broadcasts from Chicago, a gal organist named Miller had played Christmas holiday concerts in a Wausau bank lobby on a plug-in for several years. She had also broadcast a "Melody Hall" program from station WSAU. Yes, answered WSAU, it had been Mary Jean Miller. But they had no forwarding address.



THE GREAT DAYS OF RADIO — Mary Jean is flanked by screen personality Maggie McNamara and Joe Kelly, MC of the "Quiz Kids" broadcast, as they prepare for a broadcast from NBC Chicago. Mary Jean played the theme on a Hammond.

"What ever became of Mary Jean Miller?"

The next clue was a yellowed clipping from an Indianapolis newspaper, "The News." Date: November 12, 1953. The paper was part of some stuffing in a box of electronic parts we had ordered from an Indianapolis jobber. Curious as to what was going on in Indianapolis 15 years ago, we flattened the paper and a little box ad in the "Places to Go" page caught our eye, an ad for "The Bamboo Inn," inviting all to "come hear concert, radio and TV star Mary Jean Miller at the organ. 20th week." So, our subject wasn't above playing in a beanery! The plot thickened.

Thumbing through a stack of organ instruction books in a local music store, a set of Stephen Foster tunes caught our interest, more so after we noted the arranger's name was given as Mary Jean Miller of Bismarck — North Dakota? No — Illinois. And best of all, a photo gave us our first view of our subject. However, the copyright date was 1951. She had been many places since that year so we didn't follow up the clue. It turned out later that we should have.

In our considerable correspondence pertinent to the job of seeking high interest-value stories for this publication, we would occasionally slip in an inquiry about that Miller gal. We got some perplexing answers.

One writer told us he remembered the Miller broadcasts from Chicago clearly and the name of the show wasn't "Morning Serenade" but "Frontiers of Faith" and included a male quartet which sang hymns while Mary Jean accompanied on a Hammond. Besides, he recalled seeing the group, so it had to be on TV, not radio.

Another one wrote, "She was the musical director for the 'Quiz Kids' program when it originated from NBC Chicago — about 1952, I think."

Obviously, the quarry wore many hats, the better to confuse the pursuer.

The next adventure in quest of La Miller was straight out of a Fibber McGee broadcast, with a touch of "Allen's Alley." He was a visitor from Florida, in his late sixties.

"Howdy, bub. Yup, I know what I'm talkin' 'bout, I do. This female organ player played a concert on some kind of new-fangled organ without no pipes. She did it right there in Fort Lauderdale — oh, say — 'bout '56 or '57, give or take a year. Naw, she warn't no visitor. Lived there reg'lar with her husband. I usta stop playin' shuffleboard an' ogle her when she walked by the park. A mighty fair lookin' woman. I'll tell you. Well worth the oglin'. Yup, that right — Mary Jean Miller. Played up a storm on that thing with all the black 'n white keys — 'n footpedals."

There just had to be more than one organist with that very distinctive name. Perhaps more than two. Utter confusion!

During the next few months, "Miller watchers" reports were reminiscent of "flying saucer" sighters' claims. She was, or had been, just about everywhere — except where we could corner her for an interview. The sightings continued.

"I remember hearing a Mary Jean Miller playing hymns on a theatre organ over station WRHM in Minneapolis around 1933. She was very young."

"While I was studying in England there was a Mary Jean Miller studying harmony and composition at the Guildhall School of Music in London. I was enrolled there during 1936."

"I was playing Hammond in this chapel in Chicago and a good looking gal with that name married an Army Captain there just a few days after Pearl Harbor in 1941. I was expecting to be drafted any day. I was, too."

"I heard her on a Hammond in Miami, Florida, in 1950. All she talked about was fishing when she wasn't playing. Couldn't get enough of it. Well, her music was right fine, but I don't like fish."

"Try the union."

"Check with the AGO!"

That last advice should have been followed, in retrospect.

It was during the 1968 ATOE convention that a nearby conversation implanted itself on our consciousness. During intermission, between "halves" of the Eddie Dunstedter concert, a couple of voices in the next row back were discussing offbeat concerts they had attended. One had a topper, which he told with enthusiasm.



THE COLLEGE WURLITZER — Mary Jean found the Wurlitzer in the Russell Stover Auditorium unusual. Nine rankers with three manuals and a French style console aren't common.

"This here college in Kansas City — a place called 'Russell Stover Hall' — they got this old the-ayter organ going an' it's part of the music department of the University of Missouri . . . at Kansas City, that is. Huh?"

"I said that it's rare to find an hones' to goodness theatre organ in a college. Are you sure it was a —?"

"A Wurlitzer — with horseshoe console, nine sets of unified pipes and a load of harps and bells and whackers. That would be a Holtkamp chiffer, maybe?"

"No, but you gotta admit it's more likely. But go on."

"Well, the time comes around to dedicate the Wurlitzer and the powers scheduled three organists that could play the classical stuff okay and told them to choose their own programs."

"When did all this happen — last year?"

"Naw — back about '60 — no — '61. The year my son Harry busted his nose playing football. We went to Kansas City to get him a 'nose job' — you know, a rebuild."

"Okay — it was in 1961. What happened at the concert?"

"Well, they had these two guys playin' psalms, preludes, fugattos — you know, that counterpoint stuff, like 'Three Blind Mice' repeated over and over. A mess of classics by Mendelsomebody and Bach — busy music with no chords, just slithering melodies all over the place. This — played on a Wurlitzer the-ayter organ with the vibrators turned off. You can imagine!"

"No good?"

"The guys knocked off the heavy stuff like experts — but pity the poor the-ayter organ having to put up with that kinda music!"

"You mentioned another organist. What kind of music did he play?"

"It wasn't no 'he' — it was a 'she' and what she did at that console made the trip out to the campus worth it. Even Harry — with the big plaster on his nose — admitted it."

"No more partitas and gigues?"

"Hell no! This little babe busts right into 'I Love a Parade' with the drums a-whamin' and the bells tinklin'. Boy, she had those square toes tappin' before you could say 'Mrs. Robinson.'"

"A square audience? How did they react?"

"Next, the dame beat out 'Seventy-Six Trombones' and made us believe it. Then, 'Hey, Look Me Over.'" It was a gas!

"Didn't she play anything — er — classical?"

"Not unless you consider 'Cumana' a classic Latin tune. All she played was upbeat, lively tunes like 'I Got Rhythm' and 'That's a-Plenty' — except for one."

"What was that?"

"'Granada' — you know, that flamenco stomper's delight."

"What was the audience reaction to this unexpected change of mode?"

"They loved it. Brightened up the whole evening."

"Do you recall the organist's name?"

"Yeah — it was Miller — Mary Jean Miller."

We were about to turn around and pursue the matter further but just then Eddie Dunstedter and console started to climb up into the spotlight. The pair were gone before they could be button-holed at the end of the concert.

The question kept coming back wonder why Mary Jean played pops at the serious concert? Maybe she can't play the classics.

That theory was torpedoed within a week, when someone mailed in a copy of a program Mary Jean had played for a Hammond organ club (but it didn't say where!). Among the selections were such finger twisters as "Triumphal March" from the opera "Aida" (Verdi), "Bacchanale" from "Samson and Delilah" (Saint-Saens), "Toreador March", "Habanera" and "Farandole" (a wicked mess of counterpoint!) from Bizet's "Carmen", "One Fine Day" from "Madame Butterfly" (Puccini) and the "Pilgrim's Chorus" by Wagner — not to mention "Ein Feste Burg" (Martin Luther) and "Everything's Coming Up Roses."

The date on the program was January 28, 1968. Were we getting any closer?

We decided to carry the investigation to the University of Missouri in Kansas City. Even though Mary Jean's swingy portion of the dedication concert was seven years in the past, they might know something as to where she might be located.

The reply was terse, "For her current address try ATOE."

We did. The reply from the "Heart of America Chapter" was "Mary Jean Miller is our program chairman." The information was right in our own backyard — all the time.

Now we could ask all the questions and check the many leads which had been piling up. The last piece of info that came in prior to an exchange of correspondence with the long-sought lady was a newspaper clipping from the Kansas City "Star" dated May 24, 1959:

Mary Jean Miller, who will present a concert today at the Kansas City Art Institute for the Soroptimists Club, has played organ in 44 of the 50 states as well as in seven foreign countries. She graduated with honors from the University of Kansas and is a member of Mu Phi Epsilon sorority and the American Guild of Organists.

No wonder we could never locate her; she never stayed put long enough for us to catch up with her!

Finally, the great moment came; a telephone connection to "the heart of America," at last, Mary Jean Miller — in person! She now lives in Kansas City, Mo., with her husband, a retired Army Colonel by the name of Sam Ader, she told us.

Quickly — the sheaf of notes on her many engagements. We went down the whole list, one by one. Yes, she was the same Miller who played all those engagements, and she filled in some we hadn't unearthed in two years of trying to fit the pieces of her career together.

"Miss Miller, we would like to prepare a story about your career to run in THEATRE ORGAN BOMBARDE. Would you send us some notes regarding your philosophy toward music and theatre organ?"

"How about a few thoughts at random — right now?"

"Shoot."

"I have always loved and had rapport with the theatre organ. I have written many musical arrangements and the great majority are in theatre organ style — both electronic and pipe. The instrument fascinates me, draws me to it. Melodies must first be heard in the mind, the birthplace of all great music, and I have been able to apply my classical training and technique toward executing and expressing musical ideas beautifully on the theatre organ."

"How about the 9-ranker at the University? Been back there lately?"

"Oh yes — played a concert for the Heart of America ATOE chapter on it not too long ago. It's a little beauty — and the chapter technicians keep it in excellent shape."

"Now about the material for a story —"

"Story? It seems to me that all those items you read me — they are the story."

"Nothing more?"

"You might add that my home town is Bismarck — Illinois."

"But the story . . ."

"Just tell your readers that you finally found out 'what became of Mary Jean Miller' — that she's alive and well in Kansas City."

Thus ended our quest for the elusive Mary Jean — but we sure wish we could have gotten her story. — Hal Steiner

The 3-9 Wurlitzer organ referred to in the above story was originally installed in the Plaza theatre in Kansas City, Mo. It was removed from the theatre and installed in Russell Stover Memorial Auditorium, the performing hall of the University of Missouri's Conservatory of Music (at Kansas City), as the "Cliff C. Jones Memorial Organ" in 1961. It was dedicated in November of that year. In recent years the Heart of America Chapter of ATOE has maintained the instrument and sponsored chapter concerts in the Auditorium. Thus, the acceptance of a theatre organ as a cultural asset by yet another institution of higher education marks one more milestone in the theatre instrument's long and often rough path toward recognition.

Photo copying: Bill Lamb

DENNIS JAMES THRILLS RTOS

If there is ever an award to a young theatre organist who shows the greatest potential, that accolade should go to Dennis James. That fact was demonstrated most profusely on January 25 as the 18-year-old New Jerseyian performed at the Rochester Theatre Organ Society's 4-22 Wurlitzer in the Auditorium Theatre. In spite of the cold weather, the place was about half full. Dennis deserved a full house, however.

His program was heavily on music of the modern era. But, when he performed the tunes which were composed in the Twenties, the audience came to life. Though all his renditions were done in professional style, we shall dwell on the highlights.

"If My Friends Could See Me Now," a rouser, led off the program. He discovered the honky-tonk piano in "Love Is Blue." A big highlight was his rendition of "Colonel Bogey March," and if one couldn't visualize scenes from the "Bridge on the River Kwai," he didn't have it. Although we knew that there were many sound effects in the organ, hitherto ignored by previous organists, it remained for Dennis to use them in "Makin' Whoopee" which brought chuckles from the responsive audience.

"Cumana" was an excellent South American number, and "Praeludium de Festivum" showed the artist's competence in baroque. "Cabaret" was done in fluid style, and the biggest number of the evening was his reading of "American in Paris", complete with taxi horns, Folies Bergere theme and other Paris sounds. The regular program closed with three George M. Cohan rousers, topped with "You're a Grand Old Flag" which brought the audience to its feet as the console was lowered. Two encores followed with some of the best music of the evening. Final medley was from the Roaring Twenties, using honky-tonk piano as solo in a couple; "Five Foot Two", "Ragtime Cowboy Joe", "Baby Face" and "Sweet Georgia Brown."

Advice to all touring organists: If you find your audience uninspired, switch to numbers the like of Dennis James' last medley. It does wonders, especially when the bulk of your audience is composed of those people who remember those numbers.

—Lloyd E. Klos