

Carter Plays "Spook" Show at San Diego Fox

by Elmer Fubb

The San Diego Fox theatre staged a midnight "Spook" show on Halloween, featuring Gaylord Carter at the 4/31 Robert Morton organ. After what seemed like an abnormally long hiatus (the rededication concert was in March of this year) and on somewhat short notice, Gaylord was signed to cue the old silent, "Phantom of the Opera."

Promotion was mainly through a rock and roll radio station, which accounted for the perhaps 90 percent teenage audience which materialized to provide a gala spirit and a general air of expectancy in the house just before midnight. Looking through the curtains, Gaylord did some fast shuffling of his introductory selections. There were nearly 200 kids in the house!

After a brief introduction by manager Bill Mauch, Gaylord played his "Perfect Song." The kids were stupefied; "Get that crazy Hammond!" They had never heard anything that sounded like the Morton. "Fantastic" was heard over and over among the "cools" and "groovies." Then Gaylord pressed his advantage and provided a selection of tunes from "Hair" and a somewhat tamer theme from the Leslie Uggams TV show. The kids were ecstatic, and remarkably well-mannered. They clapped hands in time with the exaggerated beat of the rock tunes and Gaylord's performance left no doubt that he could make it in the "mod" scene if he so chose.

Gaylord cued his long-familiar 1900 newsreel and this, too, was a revelation to the young people. It was the baggy, unrevealing bathing suits seen during a beauty contest that amused them the most, while the early horseless carriages and the Wright Brother's flying machine caused many a young titter to run through the audience.

Then it was time for the feature film, and Gaylord got a taste of the rowdyism which unfortunately infects a small percentage of today's youth. Punks in the balcony started throwing fruit. Several people in the balcony were spattered. A lemon punctured the screen and an apple disintegrated against one of the side jambs of the organ console. Gaylord later admitted that the sudden impact shook him but he continued on to intermission. Then he announced that if there was any more of that behavior he'd turn off the organ and go home.

Gaylord's firmness paid off; there was no more rowdyism. During intermission little groups of young people came to the console to apologize for the rowdies and to get their first look at a theatre organ console. They were entranced by both the console and the sounds it produced. This was the first big concert (there were 2,070 paid admissions) during which the new Solo Trumpet was heard. It's a big sound; Gaylord used it to sync the Phantom's scenes at the horseshoe-drawknob console in the movie. It adds the needed punch and doubles as an "emphasis" stop for organ jazz.

It could be said that Gaylord really "played the devil out of the organ." He seemed inspired at the challenge of winning over the youthful group which filled the seats. We have never heard him do the "Phantom" score with more attention to detail nor with a more impressive over-all effect. His scoring really "hit the spot" as veteran Fox organist Edith Steele put it. Which means Gaylord was able to make the grade with patrons from about 15 to over 80 (Edith admits to 81).

When it was over and the horde had departed. Manager Mauch looked at

the hole in his screen and the debris in the pit. "Par for the course" he said, "Most of them behaved properly. There are bound to be a few bad apples."

"But not bouncing off the organ" chimed Gaylord, who then confided, "Y'know I threatened to quit if the rowdyism didn't cease. But the truth is you couldn't have pried me away from that console, come hell or high water. There were too many fine people having a whale of a time in that audience. I was playing for them."

Bob Wright, one of "The Seven" who revitalized the long dormant instrument over an 18-month period, was enthusiastic about the good behavior of the Morton. "Not a hint of a cipher — no sticking tremis. It played perfectly."

"Just like when it was new — when I played it 40 years ago" echoed spritely Edith Steele. □

The story of the restoration of the 4/31 Robert Morton organ in the San Diego Fox theatre appeared in TOB for October 1968, page 5.



In the October 1968 issue of this magazine we offered a story about the San Diego (Calif.) Fox 4/31 Robert Morton organ restoration project, replete with photos of the chambers, pipes and console — but nary a peep at even one of the hard-working restorers who had spent 16 months getting the beast back in operation after two decades of silence. We didn't mean to "shortchange" the working crew; the reason we didn't show them to you at the time is because of their own modesty. They sent no photo of the crew along with their story. To those who wrote to us, deploring our "playing down the group who did the hard work," — here they are, at last, gathered 'round the rebuilt console. Seated at the keyboards is C. R. (Bob) Lewis, long-time organ technician and spokesman for the group. Around the console, left to right, Robert G. Wright, Wayne Guthrie, Paul Cawthorne, Dr. Don Snowden, Irving Pinkerton, and A. B. (Archie) Ellsworth — the entire "Theatre Organ Society of San Diego."