

Everything Happened to Me!

In looking back over a long and varied career in show biz, I've found that invariably in reminiscing with others about the past, it's most often the humorous things that happened that evoke the greatest of nostalgic memories. I say humorous . . . some of the things that happened to me seemed almost tragic at the time. But time heals all pain, and the things that were so embarrassing at the moment have become quite funny in retrospect.

Whenever embarrassing situations are being handed out, you can always count on me to be standing around with my hand out. Oh, I don't mean such things as forgetting the "bridge" of a tune during a community song-fest, or doing a pratfall off an organ lift . . . those things happen to everybody. What I mean is . . . well, I'll let you in on a few of my whoppers!

I suppose I should have seen the handwriting on the wall, when during my very first piano recital . . . I was all of nine years of age and a first-year student . . . things came unglued! I remember my piano piece had a title something like "Rippling Brook". It was one of those compositions that was played through to a "de capo", or return to the beginning, then played through again down to a sign to the

coda, or four-bar ending. Okay? Well, I played through the piece beautifully, made my return for the repeat, and then . . . forgot how to get to the coda! By now, it's obvious to the reader that my teacher was one who insisted in everything being memorized in recital. Well, I played it all over again. And forgot how to get to the coda again. So I played it again. And again! What was intended to be a two-minute number at best, soon grew to sonata proportions . . . two minutes, then four . . . then six! Titters from the audience gradually grew in intensity, and to this day I can see my very large (and at times, formidable) teacher frantically motioning for me to finish the darn thing . . . and me looking back at her in helpless confusion. She had a voice, bless her heart, that went with her ample size, and it seemed to me the whole auditorium could hear her yelling, "That's enough! Don't start it again! Just stop . . . get off! Get off!" Finally, in desperation I thumped out a G-chord and fled the stage amidst peals of laughter. It was fortunate that my teacher had some GOOD students performing. They saved the day and the concert, and tempered, I'm sure, much of teacher's ire and frustration that would later

have been directed my way. Yes . . . I should have seen the handwriting on the wall!

When I was about fourteen, (circa 1926) after having studied theatre pipe organ for several months, a young man who played in one of our local neighborhood theatres asked me if I would like to substitute for him while he went on vacation. I had pestered and badgered the poor fellow into listening to me play in all my supreme confidence. Anyway, he said he thought I could do it okay. Me . . . I was thrilled. So the big Saturday arrived when I was to start my two-week stint. It was the two-o'clock matinee, and I proceeded to walk up the foyer and past the ticket-taker large as life itself. The scene went something like this:

Ticket-taker: "Hey you! Where's your ticket?"

Young Koury: "It's alright. I don't need . . ."

Ticket-taker: "Look, we don't allow no kids in here without tickets!"

Young Koury: "But, I'm here to play the organ."

Ticket-taker: "You can't play the organ here . . . Mel Johnson is our organist and he don't allow kids to touch it."

Young Koury: "But you don't understand. He asked me . . ."

(BY THIS TIME A LARGE CROWD OF CURIOUS BYSTANDERS HAS ASSEMBLED AND MY EMBARRASSMENT HAS SOARED LIKE AN ATLAS MISSILE TAKING OFF)

Ticket-taker: "Look kid, you'd better run along . . . you're holding up the line!"

(ENTER MANAGER OF THEATRE FROM LEFT OF LOBBY TO SEE WHAT ALL THE COMMOTION IS ABOUT)

Manager: "What seems to be the trouble?"

Ticket-taker: "This kid's trying to bust in without a ticket . . . says he wants to play the organ."

Young Koury: (WEAKLY) "But Mr. Johnson asked me to come and play for him."

Manager: (IT'S BEGINNING TO DAWN ON HIM) "You mean Mel

The following anecdotes were gleaned from an interview recently held with Rex Koury. Mr. Koury is not too well known in today's roster of theatre organists. This is due mainly to the fact that he has spent many years in the anonymous surroundings of supplying scores and themes for radio and television.

There was a time, in the 1930's, when "Rex Koury At The Console" appeared in the billing throughout the R.K.O theatre chain. Rex was billed as the "Youngest Professional Organist in the World". Having studied with Jesse Crawford, and learning well, young Mr. Koury displayed considerable talent at the theatre organ and proved to be a big attraction.

With the demise of theatre playing dates, he became involved in radio scoring, which proved to be a permanent livelihood. His best known composition is the "Gunsmoke" Theme. This music has been used every week on the air for seventeen years. (See record review - T.O. October 1971)

Rex Koury's theatre organ stylings are an authentic reminder of the halcyon days of R.K.O., Loews, Paramount, and Fox. Here he relates some of his early experiences.

asked *you* to play for him during his vacation?"

Young Koury: "Yes Sir."

Manager: (LOOKING AT YOUNG KOURY RESPLENDENT IN POWDER-BLUE KASHMIR SWEATER, AND KNEE-SOCKS) "You mean you can really *play* that thing? How old are you, Son?"

Young Koury: "Fourteen, Sir."

Manager: "well . . . okay. You go on down to the pit, but be sure you play *real soft* until I get a chance to listen to you!"

Well, I guess I must have turned in a satisfactory performance after all. Four years later this same theatre manager, a wonderful man by the name of Harry Black, was to give me my first crack at the "big time" and a four-year contract with Radio-Keith-Orpheum Theatres in the east.

Then there was the time several years later and after sound movies had taken over, that two big-wigs from the RKO music department in New York City came to the theatre where I was then playing. They were there to listen to my solo spot. It seems there was an opening for a solo organist in one of RKO's top movie palaces and I was being considered. Came the show, and my big opportunity! I had selected that week to play Rachmaninoff's popular "Prelude In C-Sharp Minor" . . . generally conceded to be quite difficult to perform smoothly on the organ. The "Mighty Wurlitzer" ascended silently while a film-clip projected on the screen explained all this to a packed house. With full organ, I then commenced . . . "A", "G-sharp", and down to low "C-sharp". And there it was! My audition consisted of *three notes*, all played in the pedal! What happened? You guessed it. The heavy open Tuba low "C-sharp" ciphred, drowning out each and every attempt to proceed! Ah, me . . . nothing to do but push the "down" button and sink unhappily into the bowels of the pit. To make matters even worse, the show could not proceed until someone succeeded in yanking the pipe . . . a matter that seemed to take hours! Probably only took three or four minutes, but it seemed an eternity. Well, that was that. No . . . I didn't get the job even though the "brass" was enveigled into staying through the next show. An odd thing . . . in chatting with one of my first theatre organ teachers, a wonderful player by the name of Bill Meeder, he told me

that the same exact thing had happened to him some time before. However, he was luckier than I . . . he wasn't auditioning!

Fortunately, I wasn't always the butt-end of fate's whimsies. The following episode occurred while I was playing an engagement at the world-famous Roxy in New York. It happened to someone else for a change. However, I still awaken occasionally with the "cold shudders". A week or so previous, some of the musicians in the huge Roxy orchestra had attended a show featuring the frantic "Frank & Milt Britton Band". This was a zany group that squirted Seltzer bottles, clubbed each other over the head with rolled-up newspaper bats, broke fiddles to bits, and generally indulged in all sorts of musical (and unmusical) mayhem. But hilarious! Well, that's where the idea was born. The concertmaster of the Roxy orchestra at that time, who shall now remain nameless, was a most vocal and vociferous individual, particularly when it came to discussions of a political nature. Now it happened that this talented gentleman had recently come into possession of an extremely valuable old Italian violin, an acquisition that had set him back some \$3,000! It was his pride and joy, and I'm sure he valued it more than life itself. Well, as anyone who has worked with string musicians knows, it is the habit of most violinists to set their bows and violins down on their chairs while taking a break. The "fiddlers" at the Roxy were no exception. That is . . . all but one. That concertmaster wasn't going to leave his priceless treasure where anyone could touch it. For days other string players kept up a constant kidding and chiding over his extreme precautions. After all they also had valuable fiddles. *They* weren't afraid to leave them on their chairs. After all, the orchestra pit *was* in the basement. What could happen?

So the day inevitably came. Against his own better judgement, I'm sure, when the pit had descended for a twenty-minute break, our friend very carefully placed bow and violin on his chair like all the others, and returned to the unfinished poker game that would continue until the warning buzzer sounded. In a most fiendish and subtle manner our concertmaster was carefully drawn into a complex discussion of things political, which heated debate continued as the orchestra filed

back onto the platform. Then it happened! Standing in front of their seats and still arguing away, one of the musicians unthinkingly sat down on the concertmaster's seat! A loud "crunch" . . . complete and stunned silence . . . then a wail of despair from the stricken owner that could be heard all the way back to the fourth balcony! Well, you guessed it. The practical (?) jokers had purchased one of Frank and Milt Britton's break-away \$2.00 fiddles and exchanged instruments while our friend was absent. His fine violin had been carefully placed in it's case and stored under his chair. Needless to say, we played two or three shows that day before our good concertmaster's hands stopped shaking enough to allow him to continue in his official capacity!

I must tell you about a letter I received back in 1941, while I was solo organist for the National Broadcasting company in Hollywood, Studio H boasted a very nice three-manual theatre-style pipe organ which my old friend, Paul Carson, had designed and installed. NBC in those good ol' radio days maintained two separate networks . . . the Red, which covered about one-half of the nation, and the Blue Network (soon to become the American Broadcasting Company) which covered the remainder of the country. As part of my duties I played daily broadcasts over both networks on this fine organ. On the Red, I played under my own name . . . Rex Koury. On the Blue, I went by the moniker of Roy St. George. I suppose to some extent I cheated. Because of the limitations of time I usually played many of the same arrangements under both names and on both networks. Same style . . . same registration . . . everything. So it was all the more remarkable when one day I received the following communication from a fan:

"Dear Mr. Koury:

I enjoyed your fine organ music over our local Red network station at 10:00 P.M. last tuesday evening. I listen to your music regularly and think your selections are great and style is terrific. We also listen occasionally to that other fellow, Roy St. George on NBC from Hollywood, but he can't play nearly as well as you . . ."

Then there was the time during my sojourn as organist at ABC when I was assigned to do the music for a radio drama called "*The Amazing Mr.*

Malone". I was assisted at the Hammond organ by a small group of musicians who helped provide the background music, cues and bridges. One day in the midst of dress rehearsal, the organ suddenly quit, billows of smoke began pouring out of the Leslie speaker, and "you-know-who" jumped off the organ bench as though struck from behind with a poisoned arrow! After considerable coaxing on the part of the director from the booth I was finally persuaded to turn on the organ and try again. I did. I played a few bars more . . . and then, another mild explosion and more smoke pouring out from the organ console! Well, that was it. I threw up my hands. "You'd better get another organ moved in here fast", I said, "This thing will never play again!" At that, everyone in the studio burst into gales of laughter. The joke was on me. The sound engineers had very carefully strung hair-thin electric wires all the way around the studio from the sound-effects truck to the organ, and on a cue from the booth had set off smoke-bombs in the organ and speaker. Verrrry funny! But you see, what nobody in the studio that day could have possibly known . . . I had sold that Hammond and Leslie speaker to NBC the week before! I had good and sufficient reason to be "shook"!

Different composers work in different ways. In composing the initial score for a new radio or TV series it was always my custom to write all the background and cue music first, leaving the "theme" until last. Since this is the most important musical element, I prefer to tackle it after all the rest is out of the way. By that time, I've established the "feel" of the aggregate and have had time to think about, and mold the ideas I would incorporate into the theme. One morning shortly after CBS had engaged me to supply the music for a new series called, "GUNSMOKE", and I had completed all the new background scoring the night before, it suddenly dawned on me that I had yet to compose the theme! Now, the time was about 9:00 A.M. and all the manuscript had to be delivered to the copyists by 10:00. I still had a half-hour drive into town, and I hadn't written the theme. I hadn't even finished dressing for the day! In desperation I grabbed a pencil, some manuscript paper, a magazine for support, ran into the bathroom and proceeded to write the now-famous

Calling All Theatre Organists!

professional and non-professional

President Rice has appointed a committee to investigate a way in which ATOS national headquarters can establish a directory of all persons capable of performing full length, or spot type theatre pipe organ concerts. The committee is pursuing the idea of a pamphlet type brochure. As presently planned, it would devote one full page to each performer. Layout would include a wallet size picture, biographical information, promotion material (if available), and address of artist or artist's manager. Performance costs would be included also, at the artist's request.

This is a suggested layout, and it could be modified according to the desires of each artist. Page size would be approximately 5 x 8 inches. Depending upon the response, pages would probably cost about \$15. Only full pages would be sold. A copy of each brochure would be sent free to each chapter's program chairman, and

would be available at slight cost to any other interested parties. It could be updated annually.

A primary objective of this booklet would be to help chapters and artists locate one another quickly and easily. It is also directed to help locate non-professional performers who would make their services available for short performances at chapter meetings for considerably less cost than a paid professional concert.

At this point, committee is primarily interested in reactions to the idea, and we urge all performers to write to us before April 1, 1972 and advise whether or not they will consider purchasing a page. If response is too small, the idea necessarily will be shelved for now. Please address all letters to: Mike Foley, Chairman, Concert Circuit Committee, ATOS, P.O. Box 66, Buckland Station, Manchester, Connecticut 06040. □

Wyoming Charters T.O. Club

The theatre industry trade magazine *BOXOFFICE* of August 2, 1971 carried a story concerning the formation of the Cowboy Theatre Organ and

"*Gunsmoke Theme*" while sitting on the "john". You know . . . it took all of ten minutes!

Well, that was eighteen years ago and still the great show goes on. I suppose I've written several suitcases full of original composition in my lifetime, but is is ironic in a way, that this particular bit of music should turn out to be my most successful, and lucrative, piece of writing. It has been heard continuously on CBS' most popular TV drama since its inception. It has been recorded by over twenty different recording artists on as many labels . . . from the rather obscure "Broome Brothers" in Nashville . . . by the Lawrence Welk aggregation . . . and up to the great Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops. It has earned this writer over \$100,000 in royalties alone! Yes . . . I have many times thought about moving my desk into the bathroom. I may do it yet! □

Film Society, chartered in the State of Wyoming.

ATOS members are prominent in this organization, including Edwin Pegram of Bozeman, Montana, Hal Pearl of Chicago as Vice President, Dr. E. J. Mullins of Cody, Wyoming as Secretary-Treasurer, and Dr. Arthur Movius, member of the Board of Directors. A recent meeting was held at the home of Dr. Movius, Billings, Montana. The Movius home contains a beautifully installed Robert Morton organ.

Mr. Pegram managed the Ellen Theatre, Bozeman, for 30 years. He is an accomplished organist and released an album on the Concert label called "On Wings of Love". This was recorded on the Ellen Theatre Wurlitzer.

Hal Pearl is well known to everyone who has seen "*The Toy That Grew Up*" on T.V. He has been the organist for both Republican and Democratic Party Conventions. Hal was also pictured in the nostalgia issue of *LIFE* magazine, February 18th, 1971. This coverage showed him at the Oriental Theatre, Chicago. □