

# THE TED MEYN STORY

by Lloyd E. Klos

Ted Meyn, a theatre organist whose work took him to several areas of the United States, was born in 1901 in Kansas City, Kansas. From his debut in show business in 1907 until his retirement in the sixties, his life was one adventure after another, but all so interesting that Ted agreed to work with the writer in preparing his biography for publication in "THEATRE ORGAN."

Ted Meyn's introduction to entertainment began at the tender age of six, on the stage of one of his father's six nickelodians. It was not at a piano or organ, but as a participant in an amateur night, and in the most daring fashion.

Tom Daley, a tight-wire acrobat and escape artist, attempted to demonstrate his skill with a machete in splitting a potato atop a volunteer's head. Having seen the performer practice this feat on a block of wood, Ted leaped to the stage. The potato was placed on his head, the audience sat in deathly silence, until one swish of the blade split the potato. Ted bowed to the audience which went wild over his bravery. Daley got first prize, a \$5 gold piece, but Ted merely got a pulled ear from his reprimanding mother.

In 1909, Ted helped his father by "bicycling" the reels of film from one showplace to another. When one reel was finished at the Photatorium, he would deliver it on his bicycle to the Liberty, 7 blocks away. Then he'd race back for the second, while intermission at the Photatorium was taking place. The patrons either would have to pay another 5¢ or leave, a bouncer being employed to evict reluctant ones. Thus, Ted's father had the advantage of double-booking at the cost of one film.

"Bicycling" was eventually eliminated by the film distributors. When this occurred, Ted became a candy



Ted Meyn at the console of his one-man-trio instrument with which he made appearances throughout the east in the late fifties and early sixties. Third manual controls the Wurlitzer electric piano. — (Meyn collection)

butcher, selling peanuts, popcorn, Cracker Jack, and chewing gum, up and down the aisles.

In the meantime, he was given lessons on the piano. Since his three brothers were cranking the Edison projectors, and a sister was selling tickets, it was felt that he could join the family at work by playing for the silent films.

In 1911, to gain experience, Ted would relieve the regular pianist during the supper hour; the time of day when the audience was smallest — mostly drunks sleeping it off. However, this experience soon taught him that music could set any mood called for on the screen, and he, the musician, became as much a medium for the success of the movie as the players themselves. All were at his mercy. However, if he had played "Turkey In the Straw" in-

stead of "Hearts and Flowers" while little Eva was dying, he would have become a target for over-ripe fruit, for showing such heartless disrespect for a dying female.

It mattered not whether the pianist were an accomplished musician, an ear player, or faker, as long as he could express the emotions and tempos properly. When a drummer was added, the pianist's status did not change. But, when a violin, cello (which could really draw the tears), flute, cornet etc. were added, only an accomplished pianist could qualify.

Ted Meyn, at 12, was far from being an accomplished musician — one who could sight-read rapidly. Even though he could by improvising, make a silent picture live and breathe with emotion, he was out of business for several years.

Then Wurlitzer, the world's greatest maker of carousel organs and saloon bandboxes, began making devices called Duplex Orchestras, consisting of an upright piano with a large box on each side. One box contained flute pipes, the other, drums, bells and sound effects. The pipes were played from the keyboard; the drums and sound effects by striking the feet on a series of piano pedals. There was also a roll player.

Now, Ted was a one-man orchestra, and he did such creditable work that Wurlitzer offered him a job as demonstrator of their several models. So, he advanced to this position, performing after school and on Saturdays in the Wurlitzer showrooms on McGee Street near Twelfth in Kansas City, Mo.

Small theatre owners, for whom the instrument was intended, came from miles around to hear its possibilities. Many were sold, and Ted Meyn became a "boy wonder" in this field. When his schedule permitted, he played the opening program in theatres which had installed the instruments.

A doctor in St. Joseph, Mo. purchased an instrument for a small theatre he operated. Knowing Ted's father, he got permission to keep Ted as a player for a week. The doctor, also a collector of antiques, provided room and board, and to Ted's surprise, was privileged to sleep in a room, completely furnished with Jesse James' memorabilia — his bed, his wash basin, his comb and brush, yes, even the pot under the bed. What young man wouldn't leap to take advantage of Jesse James' pot in those days? The memory of that famous outlaw was still fresh in the region.

At that time, Wurlitzer had installed only two Hope-Jones organs in the Kansas City area. One was in the Isis Theatre in Kansas City, Mo., and played by Carl Stallings, the greatest ever, in Ted's opinion. The other was in a theatre in Manhattan, Kansas, played by Gene Moore.

Whether or not the territory was ready for Wurlitzer to install a Hope-Jones unit orchestra in its Kansas City showrooms, was debatable. What they did install was a converted saloon band-box. It consisted of an upright piano with full keyboard, a second keyboard to play the pipes, a full compass of organ pedals, a swell pedal, and a knee-operated arm to effect piano sustain. There were buttons to control a train whistle, bird whistle,



Ted Meyn at Loew's Jersey 4/23 Robert Morton, one of the five "Wonder Mortons" opened in the 1929-1930 period in the New York Metropolitan area. Ted played all of them. (Meyn collection)

horse hooves, train bell etc. A 6' x 12' x 10' chamber housed the pipes, and the ranks were Flute, String, Vox Humana and Trumpet.

Ted had the instrument mastered within a day, and it was imperative that he learn quickly because the motion picture owners of Kansas descended on the city for a convention, especially to hear the new instrument. A dozen were sold, which rewarded Ted with grand openings of these devices.

As he was eager to progress as a musician, he accepted an offer to play the 2/6 Moller at the Orpheum Theatre in Leavenworth, Kansas. In a few weeks, Fred Broder, Wurlitzer store manager, engaged Ted, at double wages, to play the converted band-box at the Mayflower Theatre in Florence, Kansas, and then a similar instrument in the Kansas Theatre in Wichita, this theatre being converted from a shoe store.

In less than a year, having quit his job in Wichita, Ted was back in Kansas City, determined never to play a band-box again. Since there were no theatre organs installed since he had left town, he was advised to write Farny Wurlitzer in North Tonawanda, N.Y., who was known for placing organists. He wrote Ted that he had been highly recommended, and that "there is no question that Wurlitzer owes you something."

Feeling that the young musician could handle a Wurlitzer 285, Farny had two openings. One was in the Royal Theatre in Sydney, Australia, two performances a day, Sunday off, at \$75 a week. The second job was in Paramount's Missouri Theatre in St. Louis, where Stuart Barrie was leaving for the nearby Capitol Theatre.

Not wanting to go to Australia, Ted went to St. Louis. The Wurlitzer store manager arranged for a tryout, and while passing thru town, C. Sharpe Minor, one of the leading showman organists of all time, stopped at the store and gave Ted some advice in handling the Missouri's 285. "Be sure to take notice of how Stuart Barrie employs second touch. He plays the melody on second touch, the accompaniment on first touch, both on the first manual with the left hand, thus leaving his right hand free to play any of the other three manuals with variations and such. The guy is the best in the business with that trick."

Stuart Barrie introduced Ted to the 285 the night before Ted's audition. This occurred after the last show, and Ted, upon taking his place on the organ bench, "almost died from fright!" There were six swell pedals, dozens of toe studs, combination pistons, and rows of stop tabs which "seemed to run from coast to coast." The third and fourth manuals seemed too far

to reach. What were they there for?

When the big moment for his audition arrived, the Missouri was packed, the management stood by critically, and Crazy Kat jumped onto the screen. Ted froze in sheer terror, so confused was he. In a flash, Barrie was at his side, Ted eased off the bench to let the master take over.

Ted was heart-broken; he had failed, but it was not because he wasn't made for playing the big organ. It was simply that he had not the experience necessary to handle the large instruments. He returned to Kansas City, went into seclusion, but not for long.

The 1500-seat Doric Theatre on Walnut Street had closed because of bad business caused by the theatre chains' hogging the best pictures. The Doric had a 3/20 Kimball, and Ted persuaded the management to allow him to practice on it as much as he pleased. This was the training ground so necessary to his future success. Here, he could work out combinations, blend voices, practice Barrie's second touch trick, employ the toy counter and traps. He admits that the failure in St. Louis was the best thing which could have happened to him — it gave him time to stop, take inventory of himself.

While his training sessions were going on, various persons were tipped off as to the young man's growing artistry. One day, Walter Finney, manager of the Pantages Theatre, sat in on one of Ted's practice periods. Convinced that what he had heard was true, Finney offered Ted a job at the Pantages, which he accepted.

The Pantages, a 2,800-seat house, was a combination picture and vaudeville theatre, housing a 2/18 Robert Morton. The organ was installed beneath the stage, because Alexander Pantages believed all music should come out of the orchestra pit. So, a smaller console had to be installed in the meager space provided.

The back of the chamber faced a hall, along which were the actors' and musicians' dressing rooms. Joe Jackson, famous pantomimist, appearing on stage the same week as "*What Price Glory*", a World War I picture, remarked "Ted sure knows how to give an example of what Sherman said: 'War is Hell'. Another week of this, and we'll all be shell-shocked!"

Ted remained at the Pantages for 6 years. Radio station WDAF, owned by the Kansas City Star and Times, broadcast him nightly from midnight

until 2 A.M., sharing the "*Night Hawks*" program with the Kuhn-Sanders orchestra, emanating from the Muehlebach Hotel grill room. The announcer was Leo Fitzpatrick, known as the "Merry Old Chief." Ted is credited as being the first to play an organ over radio.

Broadcasting from the theatre, Ted had only one line to the station thru a pick-up mike. He employed ear-phones of a crystal set, using the brass rail around the orchestra pit for an aerial. Requests from listeners throughout the middle west poured in, which resulted in many personal appearances.

It was at the Pantages where Ted Meyn conceived the idea of the "organologue", a live illustration of the song being featured. When "Moonlight and Roses" was introduced, a long ladder, coupled to a railroad baggage truck, was employed in a crude version of a boom device. An electrically-lighted quarter moon hung from the boom, and inside sat a girl with an armful of roses. Everything else was blacked out for the effect. As the device was drawn across the stage, the girl threw roses to the audience.

Ted's organologues were so successful that Pantages cut an act in his theatres and replaced it with this feature. Ted also ran community singing, termed a songfest, not a sing-along. Whether he were the first to do this is uncertain, but some old song pluggers insist that he was.

Toward the end of Ted's fifth year at the Pantages, competition with other theatres drastically increased. The Newman installed a 3-manual Wurlitzer. The Main Street had a 3-manual Kimball, its console on an elevator. Two neighborhood houses put in Wurlitzers. The plush, 4,000-seat Loew's Midland was being constructed, a place which would "glow in the mid-west as a flower in a weed patch, so beautiful and large would it be." It was to house a 4/19 Robert Morton, its console on a rotating elevator. P. Hans Flath, organist and director of Wichita's Miller Theatre, was signed to play it.

Business at the Pantages was off, simply because the chain houses were getting all the good pictures. The booking agents were saying: "There ain't enough people out there to keep themselves warm if they bundled together."

Publicity stunts became common, and if the stunt were original and big enough to hit the papers, it always

paid off. Song pluggers, traveling out of Chicago, talked about Paul Ash, the Master of Ceremonies at the McVickers Theatre, who with long, wavy hair, was standing them outside in lines four abreast.

Ted says: "The permanent wave machine was introduced for the first time in Kansas City at Woolf Bros., an exclusive men's store, which, with the introduction of the machine, hoped to attract the patronage of women. The store was having no luck with the women, who were more modest then, (You've come a long way, baby!).

"Working with the theatre and store managements, I let my hair grow until I was ready for the machine. Photographers from the Star and Times were present, three attendants worked over me. The resulting publicity in the press, plus my statement that 'I wanted hair like Frederic Chopin', was like a sensation. Theatre patrons stormed the Pantages in droves to see and hear Ted Meyn."

During this run of good fortune, the director of stage presentations of Loew's Theatres, Louis K. Sidney, called on Ted, saying: "Get a haircut, join Loew's, grow with us, and I promise you that one day, you'll play the organ in New York's Capitol Theatre."

Bill Dalton was premier organist in Columbus, Ohio. Sidney wanted him to open Loew's Ohio, but Dalton wanted too much money. He had "to be cut down to size", was how Sidney phrased it. Sidney planned to open the Ohio's 4-manual Robert Morton with Henry B. Murtagh, and Ted Meyn at Loew's Broad 3-manual Kimball. "That will put Mr. Dalton right smack between the two greatest novelty men in the business. I'm willing to match whatever expense you've required in the past, and that's what I told Murtagh. I'll be needing you in Cleveland in 10 weeks, but I'll get Dalton, one way or the other." Ted accepted this most generous offer.

Before heading east, Ted had lunch one day in the Nance Cafe with a man who was destined to be world famous. He was the artist at the Newman Theatre, painting beautiful lobby display posters and drawing art for newspaper advertising. The man's name: Walt Disney.

Walt sensed the importance behind the introduction of sound movies, starting about 1928. "You realize," said Walt, "that sound is going to put

a lot of people out of work, especially musicians. But, the guy who goes with sound is going to stay in business."

Walt explained that he was heading for the west coast soon, to produce a sound cartoon of a mouse caricature, and in time, other features. "That is where you come in, Ted. I want sound effects. Anybody who can produce organ sound effects for *Krazy Cat* as you do, can supply such ability to the background for any caricature. Are you interested?"

Ted hesitated a moment, but replied in the negative. He had his sights set for the east, and that's where he thought the opportunities lay.

That was the last time Ted saw Walt Disney in person. Carl Stallings, the Kansas City Isis' organist, went west and became director and composer of sound effects for Looney-Toon cartoons. Bill Livernash, organist of the Warwick Theatre in Kansas City, also went west. "If Disney took him, he took the greatest," says Ted.

Also from Kansas City, Leo Forbstein, orchestra director of the Newman Theatre, went to Los Angeles to join Paramount. His brother, Louis, in a similar post at the Royal Theatre and later in the Saenger Theatre in New Orleans, directed orchestras in west coast studios. Lou helped compose and direct the score for "*Gone With the Wind*." Eddie Dunstedter, wonder organist from Minneapolis, joined the studios on the west coast as did Oliver Wallace, organist in Seattle's Liberty Theatre, composer of "Hindustan" and "Der Fuehrer's Face", found the studio doors open to him. He wrote the score to Disney's "*Fantasia*", among others.

Ted played 10 weeks at Loew's Broad in Columbus. Lou Sidney eventually got Bill Dalton after both compromised on salary. Murtagh, Dalton and Ted used to meet at the College Inn nightly following the final show, for a friendly get-together and mid-night snack.

Next came Ted Meyn's tenure at Loew's Park, a 3300-seat theatre in Cleveland at 105th Street and Euclid Ave. The house had a Wurlitzer 235 on an elevator, and Ted presided over it for a year, until in 1929, he was transferred to Loew's State, playing a 2/18 Wurlitzer, the console also on an elevator.

In the meantime, Loew's Midland in Kansas City opened, but like the Mastbaum in Philadelphia and the Fox

in Brooklyn, it was a flop. Sound was in full bloom, and Loew's pulled the stage shows and went for pictures only. With the musicians' contract in force, the orchestra was kept, but to play only the overture. P. Hans Flath turned to radio, Ted was called for, but the Midland remained a white elephant.

J. R. Vogel, managing director of all Loew's Theatres, and Louis Sidney asked the Midland's manager what could be done to make it a success. "Take the gold braid off the ushers, ticket takers and footman, forbid the musicians from wearing formal dress, get some cow manure from the stock yards and spread it about. You'll do big," was his reply.

The Midland, years later, became a most beautiful repository for bowling alleys.

At the end of the musicians' contract, Ted went east again, this time to Jersey City to open Loew's Jersey, a 3,200-seat house, with sound pictures, house orchestra with director Don Albert, Master of Ceremonies Teddy Joyce, stage shows direct from New York's Capitol Theatre, a line of 24 Chester Hale girls. The organ was a 4/23 Robert Morton.

Occasionally, Albert, Joyce, and Meyn were sent to perform as a trio in Loew's 175th in Manhattan, the Paradise in the Bronx, the Valencia in Jamaica and the Pitkin and the Kings in Brooklyn. Readers will recognize the "Wonder Theatres" in this array.

The time is now 1930; the effects of the October 1929 stock market crash are being felt. Ted, for over a year, had done very well playing the Loew's houses in metropolitan New York. Suddenly, he was transferred back to the State in Cleveland. Dick Leibert, transferred from Loew's Penn in Pittsburgh, to the State, was being brought east to Loew's Jersey.

On the night of his final show at the Jersey, a 70-piece high school band paraded down the aisles with Ted spotlighted on the Howard seat. A complete surprise, this was arranged by hundreds of fans.

Upon his return to Cleveland, he was given a welcome night, which was featured by the delivery of a 4' x 8' postcard from Jersey City, with hundreds of signatures wishing him luck. At the same time, a scroll of signatures was sent to 1540 Broadway in New York, Loew's home office, demanding his return to Jersey City. There was an

attempt later to get him back, but the Cleveland office wouldn't release him.

By the spring of 1932, the depression had set in. The era of the live theatre musician was fast bowing out. Loew's cut vaudeville, orchestras and organists; everything in theatres became mechanical. In May 1932, he heard from Louis Sidney with two propositions. Because of his loyalty (two big salary cuts), the brass liked him. Ted was offered a job in Denver's Paramount, but if he could afford to take a vacation, he could become solo organist in Loew's Jersey in September.

The latter was his choice, and following vacation in Kansas City, he opened at Loew's Jersey, featuring songfests. As there was sound, he would pass the microphone around so vocalists could hear themselves sing. Among those were Monk Berkowitz, John Ryan, and a sliver of a kid named Frank Sinatra. Monk eventually was featured as a singing guitarist with Meyer Davis' society orchestra; Johnny became affiliated with Sammy Kaye's band; and everyone knows what happened to "Frankie".

After Pearl Harbor, New York's Times Square really boomed. The Paramount and Strand featured name bands, the Roxy had a stage show built around Paul Ash. Loew's, cautious at first, eventually featured live bands at the Capitol; Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Paul Whiteman, Horace Heidt, Gene Krupa, Sammy Kaye, Guy Lombardo, Xavier Cugat and others.

It was decided to raise the Capitol's orchestra elevator to stage level. What about the Estey organ console? "Cut the cable and throw the damn thing out into the spillway," said Louis Sidney. And that is exactly what they did on the spot. A junk dealer carted it away.

Lester B. Isaac replaced Sidney, who joined M.G.M. He sent for Ted, saying he was wanted at the Capitol as an organist — a Hammond organist. Ted was shocked, fearing the thing would be a laughing stock compared with those instruments in the Music Hall, Paramount, and Roxy. "No one will notice the difference", said Isaac. "The console will be placed high to the right of the pit, the carpenters will build a coat around it so it will look like a huge pipe organ."

Still with misgivings, Ted opened on the highly amplified Hammond on July 24, 1944, after 14 years at the

Jersey. He lasted at the Capitol until 1955, at which time, Loew's was breaking up into two companies by anti-trust action.

He was given six months' pay, a lump sum from the pension fund, and a note that his 27 years with Loew's had terminated. The latter years of his Capitol tenure made Ted the only live attraction in a Times Square motion picture theatre.

He was 54 now, had spent 43 years in the theatre. What next? He didn't want to teach, and there were no more theatre jobs.

Lester Isaac contacted him. Isaac had left Loew's to direct the presentation of Cinerama. He introduced Ted to Otto K. Eitel, part owner and managing director of the Bismark Hotel in Chicago. Ted signed for the Bismark, playing a Hammond with all speakers and equipment. He featured songfests nightly, with the aid of two 35 MM projectors in the ceiling, controlled at the console. The engagement lasted a year.

Back in New York, Ted Meyn put together a one-man trio idea; a Hammond with Wurlitzer electric piano keyboard above the second manual, a Kruger electronic string bass, their sounds coming out four speakers. General Artists booked Ted as a one-man trio.

Until 1964, he played the Bismark; two summers at the Lake Tarleton Club in Pike New Hampshire; Plaza Hotel in Jersey City; Continental Restaurant in Paramus, N. J.; Mark Twain Hotel in Elmira, N.Y.; Hotel Dixie in New York, and lastly Paul's Edgewater Restaurant in Wanamassa, N. J., where he slowly phased himself into retirement. He sold all his equipment, including station wagon, trailer and van.

He was asked some questions pertaining to music and musicians. "Rock Music? It's just another cycle. Some of it is nothing more than another version of jazz. And that ear-splitting stuff: I improvised that back in 1909 as the proper music for a silent picture in which a tribe of cannibals was dancing around a big kettle of boiling water in which they were going to cook their captive. Victim was rescued by Francis X. Bushman, while I played 'Napoleon's Last Charge' and the 'Midnight Fire Alarm'.

"Today's fashion of dress? One cannot give the long-haired, bearded, shabby-looking musician of today

credit for having guts; you have to feel sorry for him, because it seems that it is the only way he can make a living in the music business. The first unwritten rule of yesterday's musician was 'never take a drink on the job'. That rule still stands, but narcotics have been added to it."

"Other unwritten rules? My father gave this one to me: 'He who resorts to smut for laughs, or the flag for bows, is no showman'."

Ted Meyn and his wife, Helen, will have celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in July 1971; both are 70 years young. They are planning a European trip which may become a round-the-world venture. Their son, Ted, a pilot-engineer with Pan-Am for 30 years, believes they should go the whole route.

There is another Meyn who is an organist, grand-daughter Charlotte Ann, 20, and attending Hartford's Hartt School of Music. She is majoring in organ, is a member of the organists' guild, and is a church organist. The apple of Ted's eye, she plays the masters with ease. No rock stuff for her!

"Bach", says Ted, "is like writing

Latin with one hand, Greek with the other, kicking a wild cat in the tail with one foot, and mad dog with the other, all at the same time."

And so, we come to the end of the Ted Meyn story. We have seen that for over 55 years, the man devoted his life to entertaining others. Now, with retirement, it is hoped he and Mrs. Meyn will enjoy many years of relaxation which retirement is designed to assure. □

## Closing Chord

GEORGE EPSTEIN, who played the Roxy Kimball during its last days, died in New York in November. Born in that city in 1900, Mr. Epstein studied organ under John Hammond, and piano and theory at the Damrosch Music Institute. At 16, he began his theatre organ career, and played several houses in Brooklyn and on Broadway. He broadcast over WSOM, and was organist at the Roxy for over 5 years. His biography is scheduled for THEATRE ORGAN. □

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