

TO THE LADIES

by John Muri

As one reads the articles in theatre organ publications one is impressed with the fact that men dominate the field almost entirely, even though theatre-organ work in the silent-picture days was done to a great extent by women. A glance at the list of players in Lloyd Klos' column in the February, 1972 issue of THEATRE ORGAN will give some idea. A number of managers were prejudiced against women organists as soloists because they didn't think the girls looked good or dignified while kicking away at pedals; but if memory serves me right, there were about as many women holding movie-playing jobs as there were men. During the lively days in Chicago there was an organization of women theatre organists whose president was Anita DeMars, featured at the Capitol Theatre. Other Chicago names that reached the top of the prestige list were Helen Searles, Mildred Fitzpatrick, Irma Glen, Elsie May Look, Edna Sellers (who played twin-console duets with her husband Preston Sellers at the five-manual Wurlitzer in the Marbro Theatre), and that magnificent organ-jazzier, Pearl White. The list of fine players is long. Does one need to mention Ann Leaf and Helen Anderson-Crawford?

Several women were top feature players in their communities, such as Iris Vining, who played in western cities. One particularly eminent star was Dessa Byrd, who soloed at the largest and best downtown theatres of Indianapolis. As a newcomer, she was not only beautiful and charming; she was exceptionally well-trained for her work. Born in Robinson, Illinois, she went on a scholarship to the Indianapolis Conservatory of Music. There she built a solid foundation of piano musicianship, as a result of which she was engaged to play piano in the Circle Theatre orchestra of thirty-five players. Of course, the job required that she be able to play any and all kinds of orchestral music at sight. Still musically active today, she says that she has never learned to play from scripts that give only the chord-name symbols because she feels that such an approach to music is too mechanical and that

one doesn't need it if one can read music.

When she was asked to play the Circle Wurlitzer in 1921, she took a crash course in organ and was an instant success. In 1924 she was a relief organist at the Circle, a job that gave her time to play in a dinner-music women's ensemble at the Claypool Hotel, where she had the chance to meet Victor Herbert and John Philip Sousa, the latter of whom she considered "a doll." Later she became solo organist at the theatre, with Walter Flandorf, Bomer Kramer, and Herb Koch as relief organists. In 1928, when the owners of the new Indiana Theatre were deciding what organ to purchase, they sent Dessa to Chicago to look over (and select) a 3/17 Barton. The trip was nothing new, for she had occasionally taken the Monon night train to Chicago, arriving in that city at 7:30 a.m., so that she could attend Jesse Crawford's performances at the Chicago Theatre and gain some fresh ideas about picture-playing and solo work. She worked steadily at the Circle from 1921 to 1928 and at the Indiana from 1928 till 1931. She was kept on long after most organists elsewhere had been dismissed; she was at the Circle in 1939, playing spotlight solos.

In the late thirties, she had a radio program for young people on radio station WIRE. From 1938 through 1940, the program was called "Uncle Connie and Aunt Dessa", a piano-organ duo that she played with Harry Bason. Children were asked to draw pictures representing popular tunes and send them in for Connie and Dessa to guess what music the pictures represented and then play it. (This stunt would be even better on television today.)

During the ensuing years, she and her sister Virginia (now Mrs. Stephen Richtoris, also an organist) appeared in concert on every radio and television station in town. Virginia still plays professionally on Indianapolis television. Dessa fondly remembers Durward Kirby, who was then a young remote-control man monitoring her Circle radio programs, and Dick Powell, who



DESSA BYRD in 1940.

was a friend of hers until his death.

She particularly remembers one specialty solo she did, called "Animals." Slide-pictures of animals were projected on the screen as she played appropriate tunes like "Horses" and "Tiger Rag."

Although she prefers to live in retirement, she was persuaded to give a public performance on March 19, 1971 at the Indianapolis Rivoli Theatre, a house that features regular concerts on a large 3/17 Louisville Uniphone organ with 32-foot diaphones. It was a sell-out, and her former employers at station WFBM sent a basket of orchids. Her name still had the old magic draw. Today, she is a woman of wit, good nature, and unpretentiousness, who can play up a storm of technique at her two pianos and electronic organ in her beautiful home. She has made four LP recordings. To hear her play "The World is Waiting for the Sunrise" as a left-hand counter-melody to a well-paced "Nola" in the right takes one back to the days of organ showmanship.

In December, 1969, *The Indianapolis News* printed a capsule word-picture of Dessa in her element: "When the magenta light swept to stage-left at the Circle Theatre, a hush fell over the audience. It was the era of Dessa Byrd, undisputed queen of the pipe organ. There was no one to compare . . ." It is good to have her with us, one of the remaining grand ladies of the theatre organ. □