

# Things are "Looking Up" at the Centre

by Stu Green

Steve Adams, a former student at the University of Minnesota, made the trip to Milwaukee willingly; the project was right up his alley. He had been requested by the Theatre Historical Society to gather data on two Milwaukee theatres.

Steve Adams called upon two of his friends to accompany him, Norman Gullixson, 22, a student at the University of Minnesota, and Paul Wesley, 29, who has been playing theatre pipe organs for almost ten years. At the Centre they were cordially greeted by manager Jack Ringe and assistant manager Steve Kaniewski. It was while they were being escorted through the downtown Centre theatre that Steve saw it — a dust-covered and forlorn looking console hulking in the orchestra pit. Later, Gullixson and Wesley confirmed that it was an historic moment — love at first sight. From

that moment on the die was cast; Steve just had to do something about restoring some dignity to that poor beat old organ. His first step was to enlist the help of Gullixson and Wesley. He got no resistance from either. That was in March 1971.

Yet, it wouldn't be easy; the Centre theatre is in Milwaukee while the prospective restorers lived in Minneapolis — a long commute. Besides the former Warner-operated theatre had a long record of neglect-induced decay. For example, the trio learned later that water had been leaking into one of the organ chambers for 15 years with no effort to stop it.

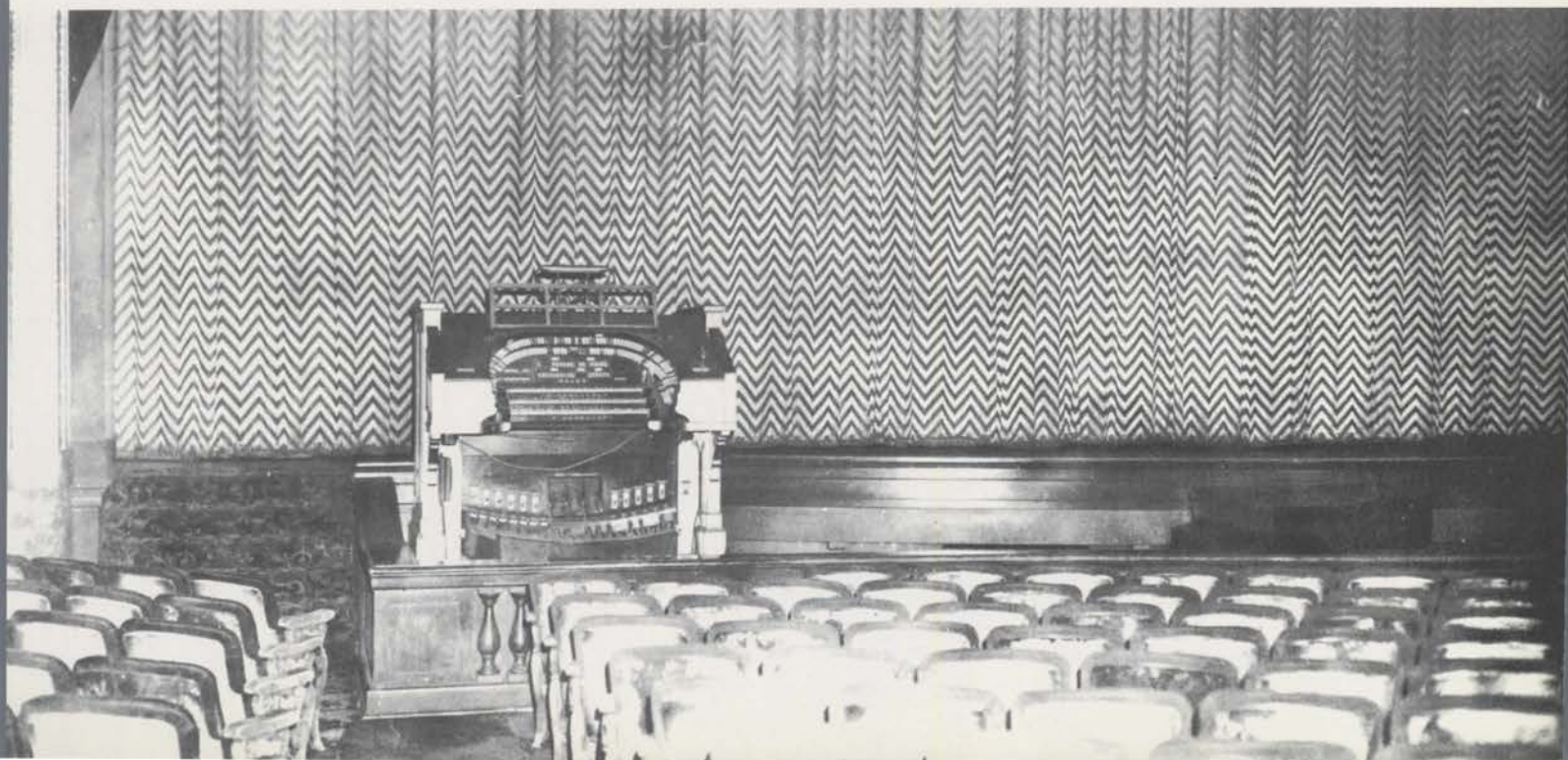
The trio decided to try to get the organ in good enough shape for a recording by Paul Wesley, a long-time pipe aficionado. The commuting was murder but they managed in several trips to get the many dead notes

playing, dead chests rewinded, tuned the instrument and deadened the sound of dripping water in the right chamber by letting it fall on felt padding. They had one week to accomplish the repair before the recording date.

In the course of their investigation they uncovered some facts about the house. It was the last Rapp & Rapp house built and it opened in November 1931 as the Warner theatre with many movie stars present, even one of the Warner brothers. The same information source, 1931 newspapers, offered a tale about the organ in the theatre.

The Centre's Kimball organ (a 28-ranker), the largest still installed in a theatre west of Detroit and East of Oregon, is said to be a portion of the organ originally built for New York City's Radio City Music Hall. Kimball in Chicago was given the contract by Samuel Rothaphel (better known as

1954 photo of the raised console.





A pooped Steve Adams looks forward to a few hours sleep in a nearby hotel after an all-night session of organ-fixing at the Centre.

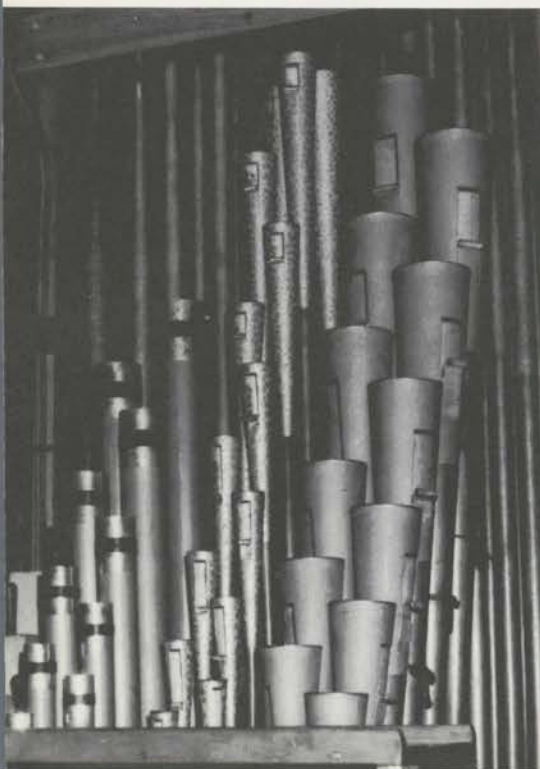


Organist Paul Wesley helped greatly in getting the Kimball ready to record.

“Roxy”) when he was designing the Music Hall in 1929. However, the big crash in November and the subsequent depression in the '30s slowed the construction of both the Centre and the Music Hall. Kimball, in deep financial trouble, was forced to turn over its contract to the Wurlitzer Co. The partially completed Kimball organ was sold to two theatres under construction. Thus, the Centre became the home of one-half of the original Radio City Music Hall Kimball organ.

It's a good story, and it just might be true because it's known that Roxy's original intention was to install a Kim-

Right chamber lower level pipework. French Horn (fat conical bells), Echo Horn (spotted metal, center) and Open Diapason (with black bands), 8' String offset in background.



ball in RCMH and that the resulting Wurlitzer was built to a Kimball specification.

There were many faults to contend with in the neglected organ, action was sluggish. Worse yet, agents of the infamous “Midnight Organ Supply” had lifted several ranks of pipes. The moonlighters were known, however, and all parts have since been returned.

Of the 250 swell shutters, only 100 operated and most of these hissed due to air leaks. At least the console elevator worked.

Came time for the all night recording session and there was still no combination working, and worse yet, the Tibia was still mute. The trio decided to go ahead with the recording anyway,

A sea of strings. All nine ranks of strings are celested, alternating sharp and flat.

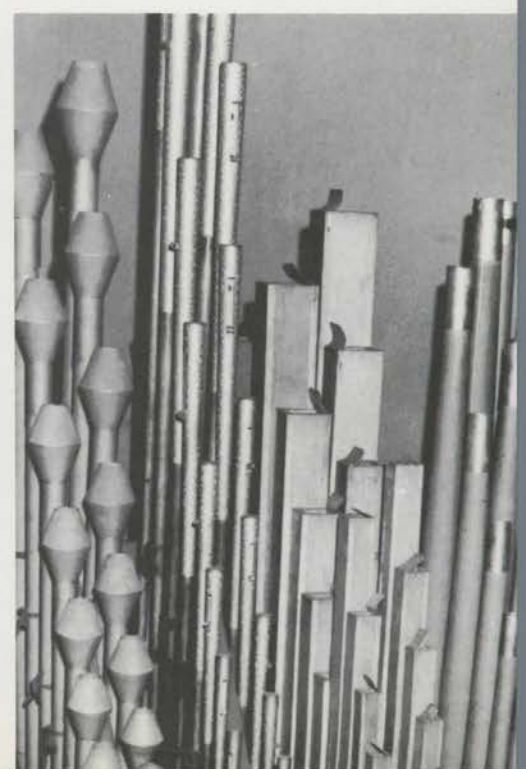


and the result is something of a tribute to the musicianship of Paul Wesley for using what he had available and covering up most of the difficulties encountered.

After the recording was made, things started to change for the better. The new owners, the Marcus Corporation, took note of the record. The organ fell in with their plans for the theatre.

Then things happened in quick succession. The Marcus Corporation proved to be a progressive corporation with intentions of making the Centre an attractive place to see a show. The Corporation found Steve a job. The objective was to help maintain the house. It was remarkably complete, despite the years of neglect. All the wall

Upper level right chamber pipework. L to R, Saxophone, Orch. Oboe, Concert Flute, Waldhorn, Clarinet, Swell shutters are at left.





The 15 volt, 22 ampere generator runs from the driveshaft of 15 hp 440 volt 3 phase Woods motor. The Orgoblo (right) generates 10 and 15 inch pressures. Blower room is off the right chamber.

artwork and most of the lobby furniture etc. were still intact. So, besides working on the organ. Steve has been replacing hundreds of long dead light bulbs and getting the house's electrical systems back in full operation.

In mid-'71 he moved to Milwaukee to end the commuting, now that he had a permanent job. And Paul Wesley is considered house organist. Between them, the organ is coming along nicely.

As soon as Steve got settled in Milwaukee he began to think about ATOS. He had been Vice Chairman of the ATOS chapter in Minneapolis, and had to give it up when he moved.

Sheets of plastic were used to protect the 16' Tibia from further water damage. The metal pipes are rare 16' French Horns.



Damage to ceiling and wall of right chamber caused by years of water seepage from a leaky roof. Luckily, no irreparable damage resulted.

As soon as Steve, Paul and a newcomer named Larry Crawford, had enough restoration work done to make the 3/28 presentable, they contacted the Dairyland chapter of ATOS and showed some of the members what they had accomplished and told of what they hope to accomplish. Members of the chapter have been helpful and in return they now have access to the organ, says Steve.

Steve Adams grew up in the Bay Area of California and became interested in theatres during the "Save the Fox" campaign in San Francisco when the efforts of a valiant little group tried vainly to get the city to take over the historic house for a badly needed municipal auditorium.

Reflects Adams, "There is something about the old theatres and the

magic that they were built for that is attractive to us. They knew what entertainment was in those days – the '20s – but the depression cut it off from this generation. It's really too bad. Entertainment in the '20s was a safe and legal form of escape."

And Paul Wesley, who hails from Montague, California, has gained new recognition as a theatre organist. He broke in on pipes at the Sacramento Carl Greer Inn 4/17 Morton several years ago and has played electronics and piano engagements for the past ten years. The Centre is his first theatre job and regular opportunity to play pipes. He often plays before the movie and during intermissions, plus special events staged in the theatre.

Things are looking up for pipe organ music at the Milwaukee Centre theatre.

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