

Harvey Bids His Wurlitzer "Good-by"

by Stu Green

It was a southern California institution; buffs and organists came from all over to Tarzana to play and hear "The Harvey Heck Wurlitzer". No ATOS convention or gathering of organ enthusiasts in Los Angeles missed the opportunity to experience Harvey's 4-manual console and 27 ranks of choice pipework. Visitors were always welcomed by Harvey and wife Dorothy.

The basic instrument started life

with the opening of Grauman's Hollywood "Egyptian" theatre in 1922 with Fred Burr Scholl at the console. The film was Douglas Fairbanks' "Robin Hood". It was then a 3/14, style 260.

Some 30 years later lifelong buff Harvey Heck was looking for an organ to install in his Tarzana home. While examining the 3/18 Wurlitzer in the Los Angeles United Artists theatre, aided by organist Gordon Kibbee,

Harvey noted what looked like an organ bench protruding from a pile of junk backstage. The two started digging and uncovered a 3-manual console with markings associated with the Hollywood conception of "Egyptian" Hieroglyphics!

The name "Egyptian" was the key to the mystery of the console without an organ. At that time Harvey considered the United Artist organ too large (Buddy Cole acquired it much later), so the two made tracks to the Hollywood Egyptian theatre. They had a little difficulty "getting through" to the manager, obviously a product of the "talkie" era, but he gave them permission to explore the house.

High in the proscenium they found it; 14 ranks of pipework in mint condition. Unlike the tombs of most Pharaohs, the vandals and treasure hunters had never discovered the Egyptian's pipe lofts. That was in October 1954. A deal was made and Harvey spent the next 5 months dismantling the chamber contents and lowering same by the bucketful 60 feet to the stage. The entire instrument was moved in Harvey's station wagon. He had only one regular helper, a neighbor, Mark Carelli. Most trips were made on Saturday mornings, when Harvey, Mark and the theatre were free.

To accommodate the bass pipes Harvey dug a pit under the 20' x 24' addition to his Tarzana home. In that way the large basses could stand upright, yet the roof would be no higher than the building codes allowed. The console was located in Harvey's former rumpus room, next to the addition.

The organ was operating in 1955 and Harvey started the long procedure of refining the sound to home volume levels. He horse-traded large scale ranks for lighter ones, learned how to revoice others. Then he started expanding,

The original style 260 Wurlitzer console. Harvey maintained the 'Egyptian' motif as long as he used this console. When the organ nearly doubled in size and a larger console was installed, the hieroglyphics were phased out. — (W.H. Wilde Photo)





A 1955 photo of Harvey and son Ronnie adjusting a Tibia stopper in the Solo chamber. (W.H. Wilde Photo)

adding a Posthorn, a second Tibia, more strings, a Dulciana (used for mutations) and a Serpent which he fashioned after much study of reed pipes. Each set was voiced to maintain tonal balance in the compact acoustical condition.

Expansion continued until the chambers would accommodate no more pipes. The ranks numbered twenty-seven. The expansion created another problem; the original 3-manual console could not handle the additions. So Harvey started a search for a larger console. The perfect solution was discovered in St. Louis, where the Missouri theatre was to be razed. The theatre was equipped with a rare Wurlitzer style 285, its 4-manual console designed to

Harvey plays a final tune on his treasure. Clothed in a bathrobe, he left a sickbed to play a tearful 'We Just Couldn't Say Good-bye.' — (Stufoto)

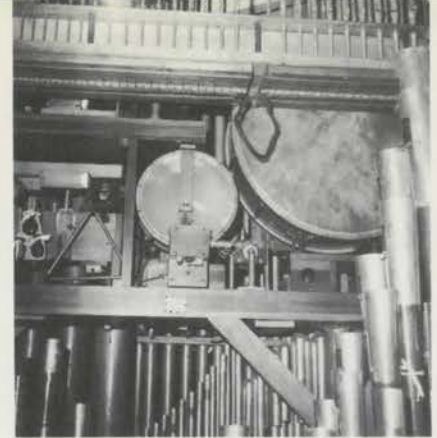


control more than 28 ranks of pipes. Harvey acquired the console and wired it in while the 3-manual was still operating, giving him 7 manuals and 64 pedals to control his instrument. The 3-manual console was later disconnected and sold. The 4-decker did the control job nicely alone.

The huge home installation brought recognition to Harvey Heck and his former rumpus room became a Mecca for buffs who marvelled at the fine balance of the instrument. Concert Recording recorded it in the early '60s with Al Bollington at the console, and again in late 1971 with Byron Melcher playing.

The love affair covered a period of 17 years, then Harvey Heck began

Bill Brown (left), with helpers Allen Tury and Howard Piercefield, packs pipes for the 'U-Haul' trip to Phoenix. — (Stufoto)



Toy counter in the crowded Main chamber. This photo could be made only after swell shutters had been removed. — (Stufoto)

to realize the organ was dominating him more and more, claiming all his spare time to keep it maintained. Then "civilization" started encroaching on the former rural area. Traffic noise increased.

Harvey and wife Dorothy decided to move to a quieter area. But Harvey cringed at the thought of moving "the beast." Reluctantly, he passed the word around that he would sell his beloved instrument.

The buyer was Bill Brown of Phoenix, Arizona. Bill already had the former Chicago "Paradise" 5/21 Wurlitzer installed in his home (the instrument on which George Wright gained fame), but the Heck Wurlitzer will be strictly for business; it is planned to install it in a pizza parlor to be named "The Organ Stop," now being built especially to show off the chamber content to best advantage.

Harvey was full of remorse when Bill's crew came to remove the organ; and a "sympathetic" back ailment (which waned after the removal) kept him away from the scene. If and when he acquires another organ, it won't exceed 10 ranks, the most he feels one man can handle and still find time to read the evening newspaper. □

New owner Bill Brown plays before the final shutdown to get the feel of the instrument. — (Stufoto)

