



John DeMello

Hawaii's Own Theatre Organist

By Alice Blue and Stu Green

For fifty years John DeMello has been playing in Island theatres — come 'talkies', television, typhoons and wrecking balls.

From time to time one hears of an organist who refused to give up the theatre console come "talkies" and has managed to play more or less continuously in a theatre down to the present. Usually it's a somewhat nebulous and humorous reference to some small town where the natives are so backward they haven't heard about talking pictures. It's good for a smile but there is truth in the legend; there are such men.

Of course we know that a trio of

stalwarts, led by Dick Leibert, have played at the Radio City Music Hall in New York since its 1932 opening; and that Stan Kann presides at the St. Louis Fox, where organ music has been an intermission feature of the programs over the years.

But how about small towns? There's Ed Pegram up in Bozeman, Montana, doing a regular stint on the Ellen Theatre's 2/7 Wurlitzer and Billy Wright still going strong on a theatre Conn at the pipeless Eastland Theatre

in West Covina, Calif. And Joe Bright has been playing at the Rialto in Alamosa, Colorado, since 1937 on a 2/7 Wurlitzer. There may be a few similar anachronisms, but not many.

Usually the best way to continue a theatre playing career after "talkies" was to take over a remaining job, one not yet made obsolete by automation. Anything to be in the theatre.

An organist aspiring to such ambitions could try ushering, taking tickets, running projectors or tackling management. Many a truncated organ career was transformed to an assistant managership. But the modulation from music to daily account sheets was an abrupt one, and only a few such recruits survived. The career changer had to be strongly motivated, deeply in love with his instrument, to survive very long. To keep it up for 40 years is some measure of the devotion involved.

Such a man is John DeMello; he is rounding out 50 years of playing organ in Island theatres. It started in 1922 when Honolulu's brand new Princess and Hawaii theatres opened. Both were equipped with medium-size Robert Mortons. Mainland organist Ed Sawtelle was a sensation at the Princess 4/17 Morton, and the life agreed

John dressed up the New Palace console for his 1932 Christmas Show.



Uncredited photos are from John DeMello's scrapbook.

with him; he remained for many years.

That same year another organist launched his career, but without fanfare. In a small house equipped with a tiny Fotoplayer, a personable Island lad interspersed his developing musical efforts with music played from rolls. Soft spoken John DeMello was anxious to learn all he could about playing for silent movies so he began studying. In a few years he was ready for the big time — then came sound. John made his decision; he would not permit this automation to drive him from his beloved music. He became involved in theatre management.

To dig into the DeMello biography, we recruited organist Alice Blue whose career paralleled John's while both played Hawaiian pipes in the mid-30's. Alice returned to the Islands a few years ago to play a Hammond X66 in the lounge of a posh suburban restaurant near Honolulu, the Pearl City Tavern, and found John DeMello still playing theatre pipes, and with a spare organ in storage which we'll get to later. Here's Alice Blue's story.

John DeMello must be one of the very few remaining theatre organists who has played organs in theatres during show time when the house was open from silent days to the present time non-stop.

Relatively unknown elsewhere, Johnny has been known and loved in Hawaii since his first job in 1922 when he was 18 at the Empire Theatre in Honolulu where, of course, he played for the silents. A small self-contained Fotoplayer was his instrument at first. Later, the house "went for broke" and installed a big Fotoplayer with huge sound cabinets on either side of the console.

In 1928 Johnny opened the \$15,000 Wicks 2-manual pipe organ at the Star Theatre in Kalihi, Honolulu, installed by Ware and McCreary. He had been studying pipes with Edwin Sawtelle who had opened the Princess Theatre Robert Morton in 1922.

According to a 1928 Honolulu newspaper the Wick's Pipe Organ Company of Highland, Ill., "represents the very latest ideas in theatre organ construction. It operates on direct electric action principle, making it one of the fastest-speaking organs made. The instrument is placed in two specially constructed swell chambers that are sound proof except for the tone openings, which are controlled by



Alice Blue's Island career ran parallel to John's in the '30s. It was through her life-long friendship with him that we are able to present his story. This 1968 photo shows Alice tickling the 88's for mainland ATOSers. (Friensehner Photo)

electric swell shutters." It had 3 swell shoes.

What became of this Wicks? We believe it was sold to an Oakland Mortuary.

In 1929 Johnny was transferred to the Kaimuki Playhouse, Honolulu, where he was featured on the 10-rank "Dukes Mixture" recently sold to and installed in the Methodist Church in Kailua. At the Playhouse (now the Kaimuki Theatre) Johnny produced novelty organ numbers, often adding vocalists. Among these was Gerald Blackshear. According to old theatre

Alice Blue describes this 3/10 in the Kaimuki Playhouse as a 'Dukes Mixture,' John, shown here in 1930, won great popularity with his personalized requests.



ads programming included music by such composers as Victor Herbert, Stephen Foster, Ethelbert Nevin, Sousa's Marches and Irving Berlin pops.

In 1931-32 the Theatre was advertising that the organist would play audience requests received by mail. Johnny's mail was tremendous, with requests such as, "Love Letters in the Sand", "Moonlight Becomes You", "It Happened in Monterey", "Hello Beautiful", "You Darling", "Guilty", and others. Many a young man impressed his girl by arranging with Johnny to play "our song" during the performance they attended.

In May, 1932, Johnny was transferred to the New Palace Theatre in Hilo, replacing Alice Blue who was shifted to the Hawaii Theatre in Honolulu.

Johnny remained at the console of the 7-rank Robert Morton at the New Palace for 8 years, producing solos and sizable stage shows, sing-alongs and Saturday morning "Mickey Mouse shows", which grew to tremendous popularity. Ice cream was served to hundreds of kids in the lobby!

In 1940 the Morton was removed from the Palace and installed in the beautiful new Hilo Theatre which opened with Johnny at the console. He added a real vibraharp and people are still talking of the beautiful sounds of pipes and vibes.

On April Fool's Day of 1960 the "tatsumi" that roared through Hilo's business section, taking lives and

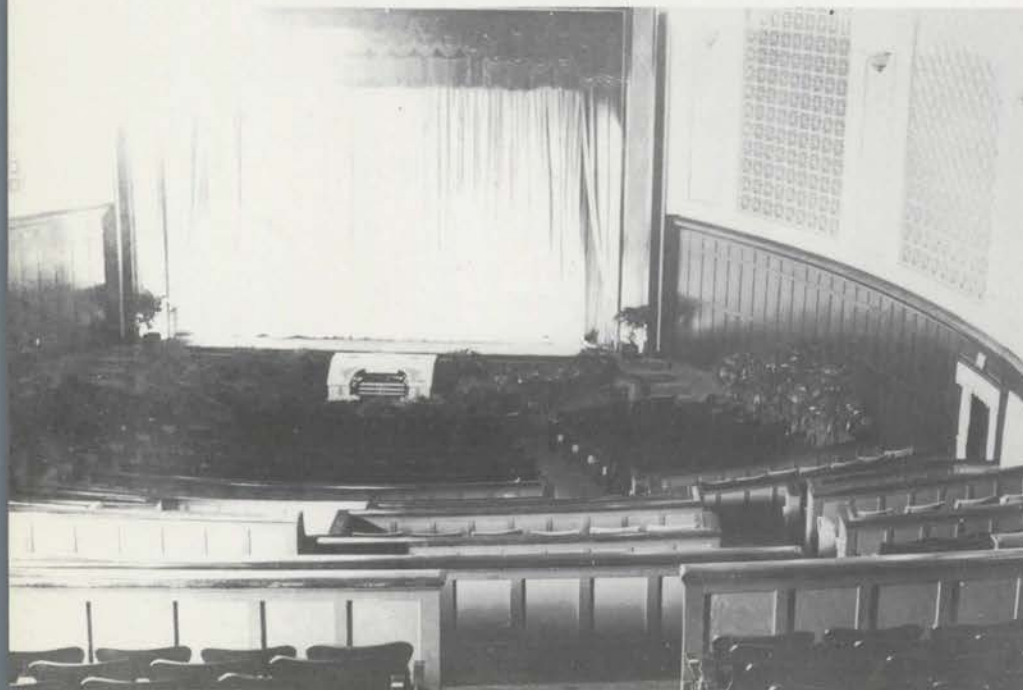


John poses at the heavily draped Waikiki theatre console in 1958.



This 1946 photo shows Johnny with his Vibraharp, playing the 3/7 Morton in the Hilo theatre. It was moved to the new theatre from the Palace for the Hilo's opening in 1940.

The New Palace theatre in Hilo as it appeared in March, 1933. John played the 3/7 Robert Morton for 8 years.



causing great destruction, washed the Morton's console out of the theatre, adding it to the rubbish and muck in the street. The pipes remained intact and were later bought by Roger Angell and installed in his Manoa, Honolulu, home with a new console from the mainland. Thereby hangs another story.

Johnny was transferred to the Liberty Theatre in Honolulu as house manager and organist where he carried on at an old model Hammond, with the vibraharp which had been removed from the Hilo theatre before the tidal wave. "It sounded like a funeral parlor," recalls John.

Then Johnny was moved to the beautiful Waikiki Theatre as assistant manager and organist where he remains as featured organist at the console of the 4/17 Robert Morton which had been moved from the Hawaii Theatre in 1938. Johnny is semi-retired now but on Fridays and Saturdays he gives out with special solos arranged to suit the mood of the feature picture. The audience, much of it tourists, is definitely and agreeably surprised to hear the big sound of pipes again in a movie house.

Johnny's predilection for draping the gold and white console in bright satin and glittering colored lights often bugs the buffs but they love him anyhow and as Johnny says, "How would the audience know the console is there if they can't see it? They'd think they were hearing the usual canned music." Incidentally, he's not related to orchestra leader Jack DeMello.

John DeMello's name should be in lights on the marquee but despite his rarity as a real theatre organist — not just an organist who plays theatre organs — he goes more or less unsung and being of a gentle, modest nature he doesn't seem to mind. He is quite content with a rather dim spotlight and a momentary screen credit along with a small display card in the theatre entrance area. Johnny never was a "show off," else you would have heard of him through the years. He is an islander, born a long time ago on Kauai and happy to live the rest of his life in Hawaii with Olga, the pretty girl he married during his Hilo years. They own a lovely home in Honolulu where Johnny's gardening hobby has created a fragrant jungle of tropical plants on a hillside overlooking the blue Pacific. With the cooperation of Consolidated

Amusement Company, John DeMello has kept alive Honolulu's unusual saga of the theatre organ.

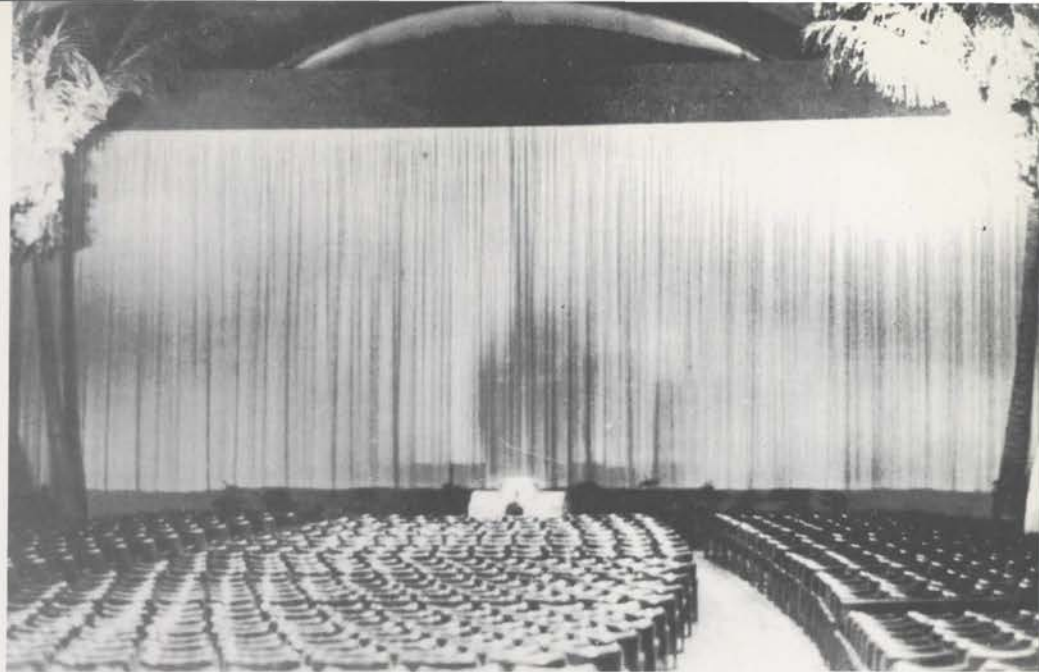
That's where Alice Blue's account ends. It was written some time before her departure from Hawaii for residence in Tonga. Meanwhile John DeMello became involved in events which led to the installation and restoration of a second Robert Morton in a Hawaiian theatre. Recall that in 1922 both the Princess and Hawaii theatres opened with Mortons.

The Waikiki Theatre opened in 1936 with John DeMello playing a Hammond. To improve the music, the Morton organ was moved in 1938 from the Hawaii Theatre to the Waikiki. The near twin Morton remained in the Princess Theatre until the steel ball arrived to bludgeon it to a parking lot in the mid '60s. Fortunately, the Morton was saved. It was stashed on the stage of the Hawaii Theatre, and there the parts remained. The Hawaii still had chambers intact from the previous installation but no effort was made to set up the Princess organ in the Hawaii. Years passed; there were rumors of a contract to get the project moving, but nothing happened.

Early in 1970, Alice Blue decided on some independent action. She approached Consolidated Theatres management and suggested that perhaps mainland help was in order. She found Consolidated's John Traut and Bob Weeks sympathetic. She was authorized to seek an organ expert from the mainland who would get the installation started in exchange for a roundtrip ticket to Honolulu.

In Portland, long time organ technician Bill Blunk was approached just as he was about to go on vacation. Instead he went with his son, Ken, to Hawaii and in 10 days of March 1970, with some local help, they had wrestled much of the heavy parts into the chambers and generally made a solid start toward getting the Morton in the Hawaii playing, a story which hasn't been chronicled previously. John DeMello's help during this time was invaluable. Bill and Ken would have remained longer to continue the work they started but Bill strained his back from the heavy work, so he and Ken returned to Portland and a week in traction for Bill. That was his vacation.

The start made by the Blunks and John broke the period of neglect and soon ATOS help was forthcoming. The instrument has been playing since the



Interior of the Waikiki Theatre in Honolulu. Organs in Hawaii are forever moving. This Morton was originally in the Hawaii Theatre. It's John's favorite.

summer of 1971, a credit to the Aloha chapter members, Alice Blue, and Bill and Ken Blunk.

Naturally, the man to put the newly installed Morton through its paces had to be the man who had never deserted the concept of an organ playing in a theatre — John DeMello. The honorary membership bestowed on him by the Aloha chapter is well deserved.

John DeMello has no intention of quitting the console although his management activities have been "semi retired". He is always available for

intermissions at one of the organ-equipped theatres and sometimes during "big draw" films the organ interlude must be cut so there will be an audience turnover during the break. Too many prefer to stay for the organ music.

Fifty years is a long time to devote to a profession which became an avocation, but John DeMello wouldn't change a thing if he could do it again.

"Well, perhaps I'd change one thing if I could do it again," corrects John, "I might hope talkies wouldn't be invented the next time around." □

John DeMello today. He still caresses the Waikiki Morton manuals regularly, and he is delighted in the wave of enthusiasm which culminated in the establishment of the Aloha Chapter of ATOS. — (Aloha Chapter Photo)

