



Entrance to "Bar" at the El Panama Hotel in Panama City.

El Bombarde

THE MIGHTY WURLITZER OF PANAMA

By Douglas M. Powers

The story of Wurlitzer opus 2043 is a long one. Not in terms of words, but in miles. While this instrument may not have traveled as many kilometers as the famous BBC Moller with Reginald Foort, it is one of the two Wurlitzers to have been sent to the Republic of Panama.

The installation is, in a word, classic. The organ started out in 1928 as a 3/27 in the Stanley-Warner Theatre at Atlantic City, New Jersey, where it enjoyed the place of honor as one of the two largest three manual theatre pipe organs (both are twenty-seven ranks) made in North Tonawanda. Its twin is still believed to be in its original place of residency, the Stanley-Warner Theatre in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

The console is a custom design by Wurlitzer. The three manual key-desk is mounted in a four manual shell, therefore the back board is higher than normal allowing for two rows of stopkeys to be mounted on it. The console is very impressive with an array of 251 stop tablets, and recently had new keyboards and a pedal clavier installed. The second touch is inoperative.

Moving to the percussions, one interesting, noticeable fact is the absence of tuned sleigh bells. It is doubtful if it ever had any since the gang switches do not reflect any trace of them. It is uncertain if these were eliminated from the original specifica-

tions. Another unusual item is that this organ has two marimbas and two xylophones, which play as if they were one marimba and one xylophone. The additional pair came out of a Wurlitzer in New Rochelle, New York.

There are many assorted facets of interest about the Panama Wurlitzer. Between 1962 and the present, there have been nine steady organists. They are in order of appearance: Leroy Lewis, Lyn Larsen, Bill Kaufmann, Pepe (Bolivia) Bustamente, Leroy Lewis (again), Tom Wayne, Ismael De La Rose, Emilia Arrevelo, Bernie Kirk-

wood and most recently, John Fisher.

The Oboe Horn was re-voiced to simulate a trumpet in order to provide a better balance between the two chambers. There are ten tremulants, five in each chamber and a total of 1,826 pipes. The console, as previously mentioned, has 251 stop tablets and also boasts three highly unusual trick couplers: Great to Solo fourth, fifth, and sixth! These were installed for Leroy Lewis' own arrangement of "Ebb Tide" and even though still operable, they are seldom used. The relay room is in the basement. The

General view of the Panama installation. The overhead grille is the tone chute. Pipework can be seen through windows.



organ has three pizzicato relays and the combination action was completely overhauled recently and boasts such goodies as an all-electric relay mechanism and an eight stage electric relay crescendo action which is much more reliably dealt with at the console. The blower is a 20 horsepower Spencer with a static wind pressure rated at 25 inches. One thing is for certain — this organ will never be starved for air! The man in charge of the organ's upkeep, Bernie Kirkwood, has had this duty for five years and has done an outstanding job.

Going back to around 1960, John Doyle, Leroy Lewis, Ted Campbell and Jack Weiss took part in removing the organ from the 3,000 seat theatre and John personally flew most of the instrument down to Panama in his own DC-4. While transporting the organ into the Republic of Panama, a



Leroy Lewis at the 3/27 Wurlitzer he helped place in Panama.
(Photo: Courtesy Rev. George D. Mac Neal)

EL PANAMA WURLITZER

Ranks — 27

Solo Chamber — 14 Ranks

Listed from rear to front of chamber

Brass Trumpet
Tibia Clausa
Solo String Celeste
Solo String
English Post Horn
Kinura
Brass Saxophone
Krumet
Vox Humana
Clarinet
Quintadena Celeste (missing)
Open Diapason
Quintadena
Orchestral Oboe

Main Chamber — 13 Ranks

Listed from rear to front of chamber

Tuba Horn
Diaphonic Diapason
Tibia Clausa
Muted Viol Celeste
Flute Celeste
Muted Viol
Flute
Vox Humana
Oboe Horn
Viol Celeste
Violin d'Orchestra
Voix Celeste
Salicional

funny, yet nearly disastrous thing happened. The customs inspectors were more than just stumped when they got a look at the pipes. Since there is no custom law governing the entry of pipe organs, per se, the inspectors somehow had to fit the organ into their list of acceptables and non-acceptables. Panamanians are notorious for doing things the hard way — at least this writer thinks so — and in classifying the organ, one of these shrewd officials decided it was not a pipe organ at all, for this was far too simple! It was, of all things, a collection of rockets and rocket launchers and these pseudo-spies were attempting to smuggle them into the country!

After things cooled down and the instrument was parked in its various hiding places throughout the El

Panama Hotel, a major undertaking was ahead of them — rebuilding and installing.

Some two years later, the organ was ready for its debut. In July, 1962, the El Panama Wurlitzer spoke for the first time to an awed and delighted crowd, and to this day, continues to allure thousands of persons from all over the world, reigning as one of Panama's tourist highlights. It also continues to provide a welcome atmosphere for more frequent visitors.

As one enters the El Bombarde, the bar area, he is immediately attracted by red spotlights focused on the beautiful three manual console done in ivory and gold with walnut finishing around and inside the horseshoe, the craftsmanship clearly evident. Then the onlooker is struck by another

Main chamber of this unusual Wurlitzer organ.



magnificent view ... twenty seven ranks of choice Wurlitzer pipework and ornamented percussions of all types. To the left is the solo chamber with its bright brasswork and dominating diaphones, to the right is the main chamber, and the center reveals a room full of percussions. Each chamber is separated from the viewer by large glass windows. Some of the pipes are finished with metallic paint, and the hammers of the xylophone, glockenspiel, marimba and piano, are painted fluorescent colors which, under



The author seated at the Powers' home installation, a 4/14 Wurlitzer/Moeller.

black light, produce quite a dazzling effect.

The magical sounds from this work of art sweep down from the shutters into a small area in the ceiling and then flow into the bar area. The 16' Bourdon and 8' Flute offsets are hidden, lying on their backs in the ceiling area, and produce quite a startling effect when played - standing waves and all!

Indeed, hearing this instrument is an even more exciting experience than seeing it. And here is where I must end, for no one can relate the true sounds of a theatre organ in words. Why not go down to Panama and take in this marvelous installation and find out how it really sounds for yourself. The address is: El Panama Hotel, Via Espana 111, phone: 23-1660. By the way, there is more in Panama than a Wurlitzer but that's not the point of this story. The point is that there is a Wurlitzer very much alive and well in Panama!

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The cinema organs used were: Wurlitzer Organ, Gaumont State Theatre, Kilburn • Christie Organ, Regal Theatre, Marble Arch • Wurlitzer Organ, Regal Theatre, Kingston • Compton Organ, EMI Studio No. 1, Abbey Road, London • Christie Organ, Regal Theatre, Edmonton •

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