

Exclusive Interview...

Sidney Torch

All photos in this article are from the Sidney Torch collection — Courtesy of Frank Killinger.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Whenever theatre organ buffs congregate and the subject of who contributed the most in the art of theatre organ playing with originality and understanding of the instrument, two names always stand out. One is JESSE CRAWFORD and the other is SIDNEY TORCH.

Crawford's originality and registrations have never been surpassed in the execution of ballads. The same applies to Torch in up-beat jazz playing.

Although Mr. Torch stopped playing and recording in 1940, his recordings of that time still sound as fresh and new as if played yesterday. It can be honestly stated that his style and approach was 30 years ahead of time. He is renowned for his musicianship, but prior to this meeting had not been available to anyone to discuss the theatre organ or any aspect of his career on this instrument.

THEATRE ORGAN magazine is indebted to Judd Walton and Frank Killinger for their efforts in obtaining the interview. It was during a visit to England in May 1972 that Walton arranged a luncheon meeting with Sidney Torch. He was accompanied by Frank Killinger who has just released the two record album of the now famous Columbia series organ recordings made during the 1930's. (See ad on page 43). The entire conversation was recorded and in presenting this interview no attempt has been made to alter or soften Mr. Torch's opinions. Judd describes Mr. Torch as an absolutely delightful gentleman of the old school; thoughtful, witty and thoroughly conversant on musicianship and artistry, both classical and popular. We are pleased to have Mr. Torch's permission to print this interesting feature.



Sidney Torch — musician, arranger, artist.
(Parlophone Co. Ltd.)

pounds a week. In those days, that was a lot of money.

- (K) Did they have any sort of a musicians union at that time?
- (T) Not as effective as they are today. Today, of course, it's 100% closed shop as it is in the States. In other words, if you're not a member you don't play. But in those days there were two unions. There was one which was called the Normal Average Player and there was another one called the Association which was only intended for the better players, the top players who commanded all the best work. If you belonged to the Normal Union, the musicians union, you were less of a performer. It was a sort of snob value of course. If you were a member of the Association you could get five shillings extra, you know, this sort of thing. But, of course, that's all done away with now, there's no such thing. Everyone belongs to the same union.

I did all sorts of things. I went on tour with a musical comedy to play the piano and this is where I first got my appetite for conducting. One evening the manager of the company came to me and said

- (K) You started playing professionally at 14?
- (T) I got myself a job when I was 14 by attending an audition for orchestras in a very large complex of London trappies (restaurants) run by the well known firm (Lyons, you know) and in those days we used to have what they called corner houses. They must have built lots of restaurants; 3, 4, 5 floors of restaurants, always on the corner and they were called corner houses. Of course, we used to have non-stop music for nine hours a day on every floor. Therefore, we used to have three bands on every floor and if there were four floors, they employed twelve orchestras. Each orchestra

was about twelve or fifteen strong. It was a pretty large employment of musicians. Mind you, the pay was very, very poor in those days. I gave an audition as a pianist in one of these things. I had a black jacket, striped trousers, a bowler hat and an umbrella. I was 14. I thought myself quite a guy because I looked older. There were about 300 musicians applying for jobs and the audition piece was Tchaikowsky's 1812. I played rather well as a child, so I rattled off everybody's cues. I played the violin part, the bassoon part, the tuba part, all on the piano. I wasn't popular but I got the job. That's how I started. I was one week out of school and I got five

that Jack (that was the conductor) is sick, you're conducting tonight, and vanished, you know, like that! That's how I became a conductor. I don't remember much about it. I just remember going there and the entire orchestra saying to me, go on, you can do it. I was about 16. But I just had to do it. Everything was red. I remember there was a red stage with red people on it and red music in front of it and a red orchestra to the left and right of it. Sounds like the charge of the Light Brigade, doesn't it. But we must have all finished together. To this day I couldn't tell you what happened. I was unconscious then, I still am. But that's how I became a conductor.

- (K) A conductor has special frustrations. When you get a large orchestra and everybody's not doing their bit because maybe they're not feeling up to it, you suffer accordingly. Right?
- (T) Part of your job is to make them

do their bit. Of course, you can't always get the same degree of good performance. To get a good performance not only must you be feeling well and up to performing yourself, but every individual member of the orchestra must be feeling fit as well. Then you may get a good performance. But if there are 100 people in the orchestra, the chances are against you getting this thing. But it does happen and you operate that anything over 50% is good. If you go below 50%, this is when you've got a dud in front of you. And of course, we are all human, we can all make mistakes, and sometime if you're feeling exceptionally well and on top of the performance you become rash. This is when you do make mistakes.

After I had this taste of conducting, I had an offer to play the piano in the cinema in the days of silent films. It was a very large orchestra in the largest

cinema in London, what we call over here a super cinema, the first in London. Most of the people who played in this orchestra in those days, if they are still alive, are stars in their own right. We've all got a feeling toward stars. We had one of the first Wurlitzer organs in England or in Britain in that cinema.

(W) What cinema was that?

(T) A cinema named the Broad was in a suburb of London called Stratford, in East London. It had something like about 3,000 seats in the days when most cinemas were 400 or 500 seats. The first one of the very, very large cinemas. Anyway, we had an American organist named Archie Parkhouse, who was a demonstrator for the Wurlitzer Organ Company and had been sent over by Wurlitzer to England for the installation of this organ and to demonstrate how it should be played and to teach English people how to play it. He said to me, "Why don't you learn to play the cinema organs." So I said, "Well, I don't know how." He said, "Well, you ought to because I've seen talkies come in the states and I'm sure they are coming over here and you'll be out of a job." I said, "Well, I don't want to be out of a job. How do you do it?" He said, "Sit down here, put your hands on there, put your feet on there and I'll be back in 10 minutes, I'm going for a smoke." The film was running and there I was stuck with an organ which I didn't know how to play. Sure enough, the orchestra did get the sack, and I was kept on as assistant organist. I used to stay there night after night, hours and hours of practice and experiment — that's how I learned the organ. No one taught me, I learned it by necessity.

In those days we used to have two organists because we used to sit there waiting for the film to break down, so that you could jump in quickly and play something. But there was a snag to it. You know, Wurlitzer organs or in fact any cinema organ has to have an electric motor to give the necessary power to the keyboard and the

At the Compton Organ installed in EMI Studio No. 1, Abbey Road, London.



pipes. If this motor is allowed to run for an unlimited amount of time, it burns out like any electrical motor. So you have to switch it off. Of course, in the way of the world, every time you switch it off the film broke down. Every time you let the motor run the film didn't break down, so in the end the management decided it was a waste of time having a second organist because sure enough as soon as he switched off the motor the film broke down. By the time it was running again the film had restarted. So they said to me, "You're finishing the end of the month."

Archie Parkhouse, this American—very kind to me, said "Don't worry, I'll give you an introduction to some of my friends." He sent me to see them and the organist at what was then the Regal Marble Arch which today is the Odeon Marble Arch. A very famous cinema in the old days, it was so elegant that all the linkmen and the reception men inside wore powdered wigs and white stockings, in the manner of footmen. He sent me to see the organist there, a very famous man, the late Quentin Maclean. He gave me a letter of introduction to Maclean. I went to the stage door and said I wanted to see Maclean. The stagedoor keeper said, "You can't. He doesn't see anybody without an appointment." I left the letter and when I went back, the receptionist called me over and said, "You're wanted on the phone." It was Quentin Maclean who said to me, "Why didn't you wait and see me." I said, "The stagedoor keeper told me to go away." He said, "I badly want to see you. Can you come back?" I went back and he said to me, "Look, I've got to go to Dublin to open a new cinema and I badly need someone to fill my place while I'm away. Can you do it?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Come back at 11:00 tonight and I'll show you how this organ works." It was the biggest organ in England. Five manuals. Frightened the life out of me. He showed me how to play it and I stayed there all night. The next day they offered me the job as

pianist and assistant organist. So I wasn't out of work again. Mind you, I don't think this is talent, I don't think it is luck. It's a combination of talent and luck but the other thing was that I was prepared to sit there all night and practice until I had mastered it.

- (K) You had tremendous self discipline on that.
- (T) Not only self discipline. It was my main chance. I wanted to

succeed. If you want to succeed you can. That's how I became an organist.

- (W) How long were you there?
- (T) 1928 to 1933 or 1934. About 6 years. I was assistant to Quentin Maclean then I was assistant to his successor who was Reginald Foort. When Reggie Foort left I was given the job. In those days, I used to do organ broadcasts twice a week, three quarters of an hour each one. Twice a week,

Sidney Torch at the Wurlitzer Organ, Regal Theatre, Kingston, checking an arrangement prior to a recording session.



52 weeks a year, broadcast all over the world. Today everything is recorded in advance. In those days we used to broadcast on what is now called the BBC Wurlitzer. I used to get up at 2:00 in the morning, go down to the theatre, broadcast, come home again. You didn't go by your time, you went by the time of the country of reception. If you were broadcasting to a country which was eight hours behind, that was just too bad.

- (W) Was it during this period you made your first cinema organ record?
- (T) The first cinema organ record I made, two records, I think or three, I'm not certain were labeled Regal Zonaphone.
- (W) How did this come about?
- (T) Columbia used to record the orchestra of the Regal Marble Arch. I had to do an arrangement for a record and the arrangement was a selection from the music of the King of Jazz which had never been known in this country — brand new. Shows you how far back that is. I was given the sheet music, the American copies of the sheet music, to make a selection. Anyway, I did, and we recorded it. The Columbia manager, A and R man said, "That's a good arrangement. Who did that?" Somebody said, "He did." So he came up to me and said, "I'm going to do things for you. You're playing the organ too, eh? Would you like to make records?" I said, "Of course." That's how I got a record. From there I graduated to Columbia and then I graduated to Decca after that.
- (W) What was your next organ post after the Regal Marble Arch from which I understand the organ is now removed, unfortunately.
- (T) A very famous cinema in North London called the Regal Edmonton. They opened that and they offered me the job so I went there. Then after that I went on tours opening up new cinemas along the way. I went finally to the State Kilburn which was the biggest Wurlitzer in the country. I opened that and stayed there until the war came. Then I went into the RAF and stopped playing the organ.

- (K) You did some fantastic records on that Regal Edmonton (Christie organ).
- (T) You think so. I look back on them now and I think they're pretty corny compared to what could have been done.
- (K) You may think so, sir, but we in the States think differently. There isn't anyone in the States, past or present, that has equaled the records you made on the Edmonton or the Kilburn.
- (T) That sounds very nice. I wish I thought that too. I listen to them very occasionally. About once every 5 years I take one out and play it and then I blush and put them back again — quickly. I don't think they are nearly as good as they should have been. They may have been advanced for those days.
- (K) They were. Well advanced. But they still stand up today.
- (T) Yes, but technically, I think they sort of fell between lack of ideas and too many ideas. In other words, they came halfway between that. In some instances when I look back on them I think to myself, why didn't I think of doing so and so. And then I look back and I say why did I attempt to do so. It was a dangerous life you know.
- (K) Like the "Flying Scotsman".
- (T) It was made up on the spur of the moment.
- (K) That was a fantastic record.
- (T) Yes, but you see, there is no tune there at all. It's just a couple of traditional Scottish tunes put together. And the whole thing is a fix.
- (K) Right, but it just flows like water.
- (T) Well, it's made up. It's improvisation. Every time I played it, it was different, because it simply had the tune of Loch Lomond or Annie Laurie, then I improvised on that. This was not difficult.
- (W) Weren't most of these recordings your arrangements?
- (T) Oh, everyone of them were my arrangements but they were not written down. They were practiced until they were in my head.
- (W) The only record, sir, that I have broken in my collection, and I have several thousand records, was your recording on Columbia, "Teddy Bear's Picnic". I had a



Sidney Torch as he appeared September 1940.

very dear cat that became frightened and knocked it off the table.

- (T) The cat shows remarkable taste.
- (K) I have a complete collection of your records, except the Zonaphones.
- (T) They are not good. These were very early days when I was experimenting and when the recording companies were experimenting. You know, the ultimate recording of a cinema organ has never been mastered to the extent of recording an orchestra. I believe that Jesse Crawford finally made records in a sound proof chamber with no sound except what he got through the can. He couldn't hear the pipes because they were outside. Is this

so? I have been told this.

- (K) I don't know. He did a lot of recording in North Tonawanda.
- (W) No. Not the recordings.
- (K) He did the player rolls in North Tonawanda.
- (W) He recorded basically on five organs. The Paramount studio, the earlier style F in the Wurlitzer hall in New York, the Special style 260 in Chicago and a style E on which he made Valencia with 7 ranks.
- (T) You're much more learned about cinema organs than I am. I had forgotten all this.
- (W) I have one in my home, 2 manual, 14 ranks. Two Tibias, a Wurlitzer Musette.
- (T) I wouldn't have thought, judging by your appearances, you live as dangerously as all that. And you play it yourself?
- (W) Strictly for my own amazement.
- (T) Well, that's the only way to do it. It's a very dangerous instrument because it is the easiest thing on the cinema organ to be vulgar. It's also terribly simple to be loud. The difficulty of playing the cinema organ is to restrain yourself and show good taste.
- (W) Mr. Torch, you have just reiterated what I've been trying to say for so many years.
- (T) Well, I'm honored that we think alike, but I am sure it's true.
- (K) Crawford has this feeling.
- (W) Precisely right!
- (T) Have you ever played any of the British organs, Compton or Christie?
- (W) Yes, it has been my pleasure to have done that this visit, about 24 of them.
- (T) Wild horses wouldn't make me play a cinema organ and on 24! You're a brave man.
- (W) I have been down to Southampton which I disliked with great intensity, it's a Compton. Yesterday I heard the State Kilburn which is as near our large American organs as I've heard even though it is only 16 ranks. I had a great night at the 8 rank out at Clapham. I loved the Gaumont in Manchester. The Odeon or former Paramount is a typical Publix No. 1.
- (T) I like the Odeon in Manchester. It's very good. Henry Croudson used to play that. Great little organ. Most of these including

the British ones always remind me of a bison getting out of the swamp. You said what a marvelous bass it had. Now this is indicative of most cinema organs. They all had a terrific rolling sound from the bottom register. There wasn't enough personality on top, registration, you know. All tended to be voiced - everything was voiced for the Tibia sound.

- (W) This is right.
- (T) This is why I liked playing the Regal Marble Arch. Because this was limited to legitimate organ in its voicing. It had nothing to do with the action or unit system. In other words, you could get staccato authority, not only in the actual key performance but the staccato of the sound. The pipe would go eep, like that.
- (W) Was that your favorite organ?
- (T) No, but I think there was a lot to be said for it. It, of course, had this straight side to its nature. Most cinema organs tend to have the same sort of loud rolling noise throughout the entire arrangement of the instrument right from the 2' down to the 32' and it had this. I think although it's a necessary part of the cinema organ, it is a trap for the unwary performer. It's like having an orchestra composed of players, all of whom have a very large vibrato. Imagine all those strings vibrating together. This isn't very good. I think that the voicing over here has tended in this country to be much too sticky sentimental. At least what we care to think of as being sentimental in those days.
- (K) The Regal Edmonton, on the Christie, had a lot of brilliance and snap to it.
- (T) That was my voicing. In the "Bugle Call Rag", that organ goes daddle daddle dup. You try and do that on most of the Compton organs or most of the Wurlitzers in this country and it goes buooh buooh go buooh.
- (W) Without tremolos, still?
- (T) Makes no difference. It's the voicing of the stops and the location of the chambers. You know, in sound, I don't have to tell you in some cinemas the site of the chambers is very detrimental to the sound. You get

this backwards and forwards roll. You know I haven't talked about cinema organs in 25 years.

- (K) This is why we are so thrilled because you are talking about it to us.
- (T) I very rarely talk about anything to do with that side of my career. I have as my orchestral pianist a very famous organist, William Davis. He is probably the best player in this country today. We sometimes talk about it and he imitates me sometimes. We have an electric organ which we use in the orchestra and when I'm least expecting it, he'll play my old signature tune. But that's the nearest I ever get to it.
- (W) I heard it yesterday - Douglas Reeve at the State Kilburn program.
- (T) They don't play it like I used to. I used to do 1 or 2 glissandos. They try and do a glissando every time.

We all copy Jesse Crawford who invented the glissando as far as I know.

- (W) He said that he did.
- (T) I believe this because I never heard it before he did it. But then like everything else in a cinema organ, it is the discretion with which you use it which is important. The trouble is this, they finally can play loud, they play loud all the time. By the time they can do glissandos, they do them all the time. All these things are very valuable. These are the points that make up a cinema organ - the ability to do these special tricks which only a cinema organist can do. If you use them all the time, they are no longer tricks.
- (K) This is where the taste comes from. This is what you had and were very advanced when you did it.
- (W) If you will permit me to say so, you were so far ahead of any other artist on this instrument.
- (T) I think this only proves how bad the others were. It doesn't prove that I was good.
- (W) On the contrary, I believe it does prove how good you were because to this day in our opinion and those of us in America who have listened, it hasn't been touched. □

- TO BE CONTINUED -