

The Life and Times of Milton Charles

PART I



Transcribed by Lloyd E. Klos

In the early thirties, a certain wide-eyed teenager was a frequent patron of the huge Mastbaum Theatre in Philadelphia. The object of her interest was the handsome, young organist. When Milton Charles rode his console up into the golden spotlight, the excited girl practically led the applause. She would sit through as many as three shows just to watch her hero. Through the years, she has never forgotten those pleasant memories at the Mastbaum.

Following the ATOS Convention in Seattle in July 1971, Mary Bowles, now ATOS national secretary-treasurer, journeyed to Los Angeles, and taped the following interview with Milton Charles for THEATRE ORGAN magazine.

In dramatic fashion, Mary Bowles, began the interview by asking, just what Milton Charles' performance might be today, playing and singing in his own inimitable way; or would he

have one of those wonderful extras with the magic of the movie screen? "Why," Mary began, "there's Rudy Vallee, running up and down the beach at Atlantic City, calling 'Milton! Milton! Here's a telegram! They need you back at the Mastbaum in Philadelphia!' At that time, Mr. Charles, you seemed to me as remote as the man on the moon. Well, we've taken care of the moon, and we're about to take care of the second situation. It is a wonderful privilege to be sitting here and talking with you. I can't express my true feelings about it. But, I'm going to stop talking and let you start."

"Well, thanks, Mary, that's great! Incidentally, I'd better say now that I think the Mastbaum Theatre organ probably was just about tops in my experience. It really had everything. And, the Mastbaum was a great theatre. More about my experiences there later.

"Like many of the young musi-

cians, I showed a little talent early, which was cultivated by my family. Fortunately, I was able to audition for one of the top organ teachers in San Jose, California, where I was born. There were three who were tops in those days — Wallace Sabin; Uda Waldrop, who taught in San Francisco; and Benjamin S. Moore, who taught in San Jose and played in two churches in San Francisco. All were great!

"I was ten or eleven when I auditioned. I didn't play organ then, just piano. But Mr. Moore took me, took a great interest in me and started me on organ. I took lessons on a big organ in the Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco, and it wasn't too long before he got me a church of my own which had a tracker-action instrument. I was somewhat overwhelmed by this, as I had been taking lessons on an Austin tubular pneumatic.

"This was a rather difficult undertaking for me, and I still don't see how

I did it. However, it was a great experience and my teacher's expert counseling helped me over the rough spots. He gave me the best of everything. I used to go on his tours and help turn pages. It was he who gave me my first musical education.

"Then, I became interested in the theatre, having heard one could make a lot of money playing in them. I got a little experience playing popular piano, and got a chance to play in a theatre in San Francisco. I believe it was called the Jewel Theatre, and it had a small organ of a make not familiar to most of us. It was a good start because next door was the Rialto Theatre, and an organist who was very, very big in those days, a real showman called C. Sharpe Minor.

"He liked me because I was a kid, and I would frequently go over there and watch him do his specialty which was playing the newsreels. The organ was a Wurlitzer, and I never had heard one. I just drank all that in, and he would let me sit on the bench with him. Looking back now, from a critical standpoint, he wasn't too much, but he was a good showman.

"Then, I got a chance to follow Jesse Crawford, who was just starting in San Francisco, and very, very big there. I went into the theatre he had left and did quite well.

"Before long, I had a chance to go on tour for the Turner and Denkin circuit, playing in theatres in Stockton and Fresno. Both theatres had good-sized Wurlitzers. Everything seemed an advancement. I was making \$50 a week, and that, to me, was quite a lot of money.

"While in Stockton, one day the phone rang, and it was Sid Grauman from Los Angeles, calling *me*, a mere punk. I couldn't believe it! He told me he wanted me down at the Million Dollar Theatre to replace Jesse Crawford who had gone to the California Theatre. There were restrictions in those days about importing talent from other cities, but it was somehow arranged for me to get into the Million Dollar. I was told to come to the stage door and tell them I was the boy from the Owl Drug Store. Sid was a funny man and had these crazy ideas, but was a real genius. This was a great chance for a young kid, and C. Sharpe Minor was the top organist there. I was the assistant organist, and I used to give a concert from 11 to 11:30 am every day. This was during the silent

movie days. I also played the supper show.

"Sid would have auditions, bringing back time and time again some sad performers. One evening, the audience included Jackie Coogan, Sr., with little Jackie Coogan, Jr. curled up in the first row, sound asleep. Carter DeHaven was another listener. Of course, I would do anything. Sid would call me at two in the morning and say, 'Milton, would you come down and play for some friends of mine from New York?' Boy, I could hardly wait! Mind, I had to be down there for the 11 am show!

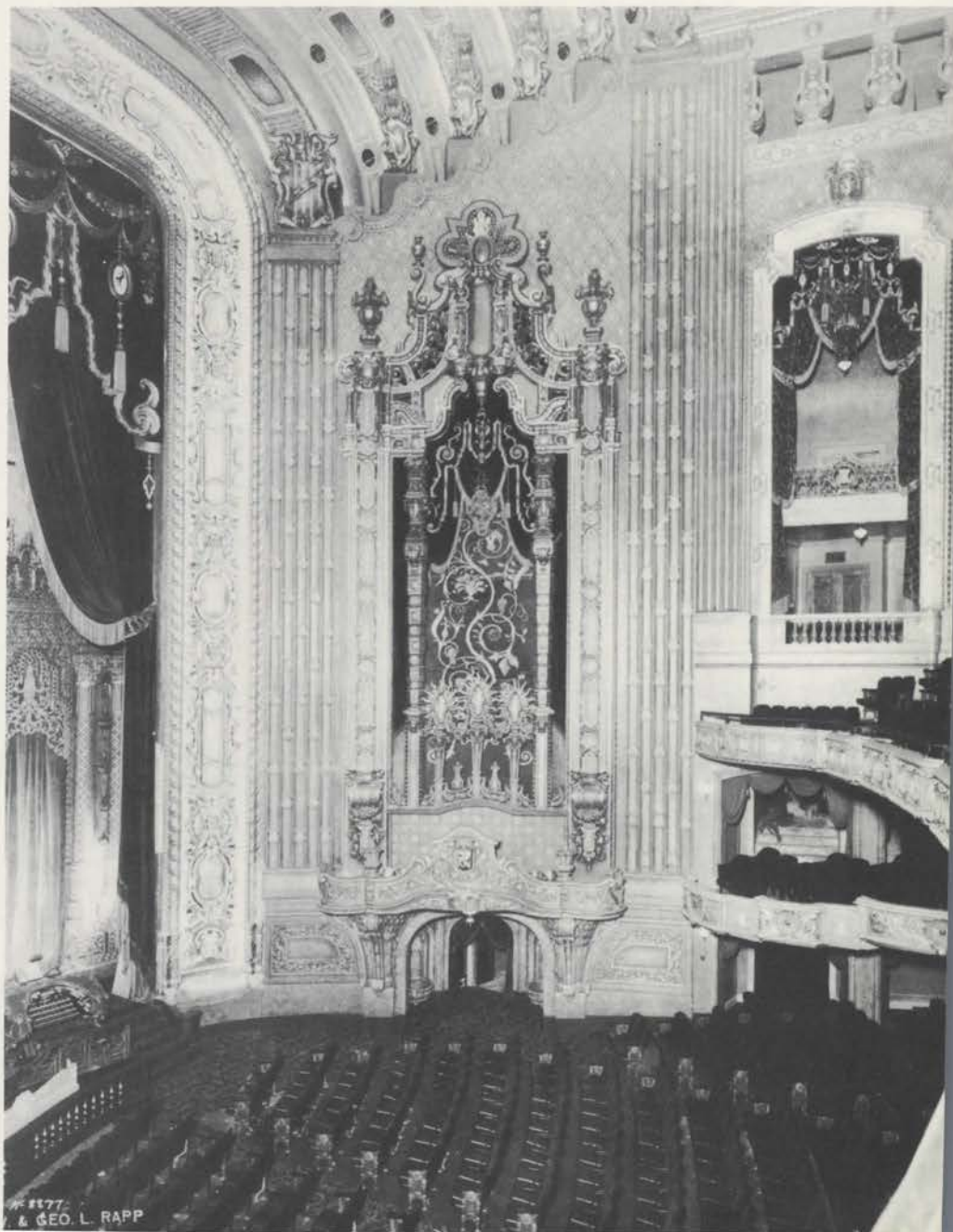
"One night after the theatre show, one of Sid's guests was Gloria Swanson, who really sang quite well.

She was crazy about organ music, and would sit on the bench with me. It is interesting to reflect back on those days.

"After a year or so, I decided I wanted a vacation. I didn't have a car, so a dealer here in Los Angeles, a friend of mine, loaned me one. My wife and a dear friend went with me up to my hometown of San Jose, I didn't know one couldn't take a vacation when in Sid's employ. When I got back, I got my notice. I had spent all my money so was a bit shocked.

"In the meantime, Jack Root, a light-heavyweight fighter in the old days, was installing a new Wurlitzer in Pasadena. Somebody told him about me, and he asked me if I'd play it.

Interior of Chicago's Uptown Theatre where Milton Charles alternated with Jesse Crawford and Albert Hay Malotte, each spending a week in the Chicago, Tivoli and Uptown. — (Chicago Architectural Photographing Co.)



Considering my financial condition, you'd better believe I did! My first number was "Dardanella" — can you stand it?

"Apparently, Sid thought better of it, so he got me back after awhile. However, I was a bit teed off, and thought I'd have a little fun with him. Jesse Crawford, who I followed quite a bit, had left the California Theatre to go to Chicago for Balaban & Katz. Jake Kalver, a representative for Remick Music Co., had gotten Crawford for B & K.

"I went into the California Theatre for Fred Miller. The organ was an old Robert Morton, not too bad, except the installation was on the stage, and there were many drapes involved, which muddled it.

"Oh, yes. I gave old Sid my notice, and when he heard it, couldn't believe it! He said to his secretary, 'Florence, I want to give that boy his notice.' Old Sid — he was beautiful! "I was at the California for awhile, and in time, got an offer to go to Chicago. Jesse Crawford had gone into the Tivoli there, and when the Chicago Theatre opened, Kalver said that there is a 'kid out there who is pretty good,' so they brought me East to play the Tivoli organ, again following Crawford. The Tivoli had a three-manual organ, and had a very nice sound with one of the most interesting Tibias I had ever heard. It also had a cute little Kinura which I used in trick conversations such as "Gallagher & Shean."

"When Balaban & Katz opened the Uptown Theatre, we played a week in each. Albert Hay Malotte was the third organist. We gave Sunday concerts down at the Chicago, and this was



Mr. Charles was a writer of songs, too. In 1926, he combined with orchestra leader, Art Kassel to write "It's You!". Theatre organists' plugging of songs quite often resulted in their reaching the Top Ten.

serious — no popular stuff. Jesse was still playing the ballads beautifully, but we decided to play organ literature. Malotte and I were good friends, and incidentally he was a terrific musician and excellent organist. He used to take "La Boheme" and use the whole score to accompany a western! He didn't care.

"Malotte and I used to send memos to each other regarding the programs, which would go through the office. Jesse would look at them, and it was something else! We were a good influence on Jesse. He didn't read music very well then; he played by ear pretty much, but very well. He later became a very good musician, aside from his always great sound for ballads. We

Mr. Charles at the Chicago Theatre Console which Jesse Crawford made famous before going to New York. Mr. Charles followed the immortal Jesse several times during his career. — (Robbins Music Corp.)



played pretty stiff concerts in those days, things I could never play today.

"When we played the Tivoli, we had a saxophone player in the pit orchestra of about 35 men. As I would go down through the pit to get on the console elevator, this chap would be playing his warmup phrase of about three notes. One day, I said, 'Wayne, I'm going to write a song on that,' (kidding him, of course). His name was Wayne King. Jack Yellen, a great lyricist, who had his own publishing company, came to town, and asked if I had any tunes. I sat down and wrote some music. He liked it, wrote the lyrics, and in 20 minutes, we had "Hula Lou." Yellen was a fast writer and was doing special material for Sophie Tucker.

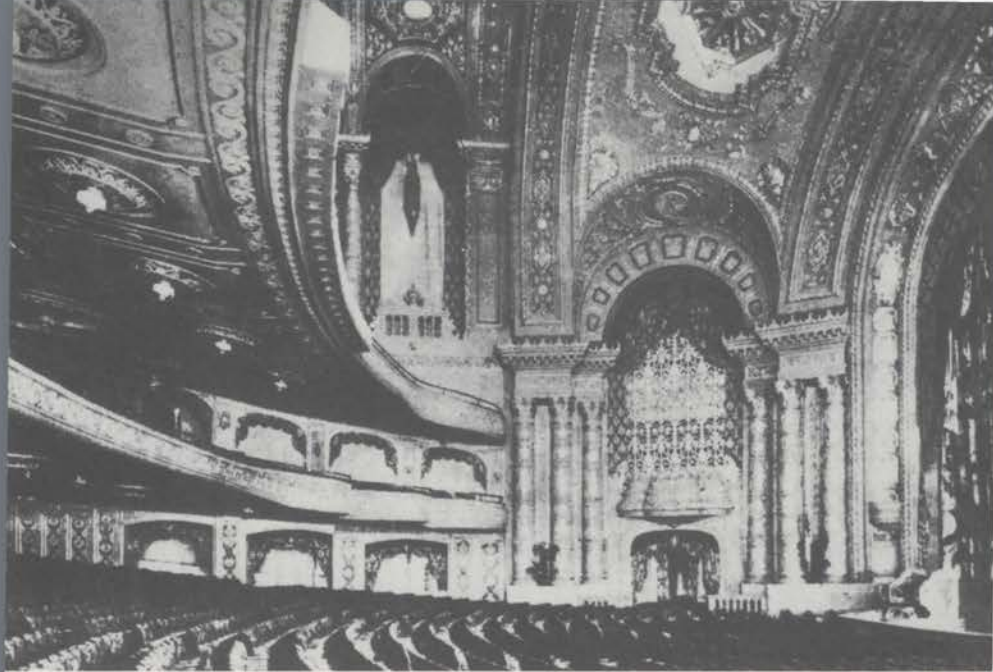
"When we finished the song, I suggested we cut in the 'kid in the orchestra', Wayne King, for a third, which we did. The song did quite well. Sophie Tucker used it, as did Belle Baker, Rae Samuels, and Margaret Young.

"In 1929, they changed the name of the Metropolitan Theatre in Los Angeles to the "Paramount," and sent me out here. The organ was a Wur-litzer, and it had a 10-inch Tibia. I went to Gus Eisle, who is now the contact between the Rockefeller Estates and the Radio City people, and was then Paramount's manager. There was advertising all over town: 'Milton Charles at the Paramount' etc. I just couldn't do it with a 10 inch Tibia.

"Somebody had told me about the Robert Morton Co. in Van Nuys, so I went to them, and asked their representative to put a 16-inch Tibia into the Paramount organ. They agreed, and a young chap worked night and day to get the Tibia installed before my opening. (By odd circumstance, while I was playing at the King's Arms Restaurant recently, I met this fellow, after 42 years).

"The organ sounded very well with its new Tibia and a half. I didn't hear it until opening night, and it sounded beautiful. The "kid", Art Pearson, had done a remarkable job. I was scheduled for the Paramount for six weeks, but stayed there a year and a half. Boris Morros, who was in the organization, and whom I befriended some years previously, wrote a little piece for me in appreciation.

"Then, I received a very attractive offer from Philadelphia and the Mastbaum Theatre. I showed Gus Eisle the



The Mastbaum Theatre had 2,500 seats on the main floor, the remainder in the steeply-inclined balcony and deluxe mezzanine. Only two theatres in the country were larger — the Roxy (6,214 seats) and the Radio City Music Hall (6,200 seats), both in New York. — (Philadelphia Public Library)

telegram and gave him the chance to meet it. I know, because we were good friends, that he had advised New York about this, and the procrastination went on for weeks. I finally received a wire from the agent of Warner's Theatres asking, "What kind of businessman are you? Do you want it, or don't you?" I had the contract in my desk, and wired back that it was in the mail, signed. Now, I'm in my last week, and out comes Boris Morros, saying "Milton, you couldn't do this, you wouldn't dare. I told him that I had given him his chance. 'Where are you going?', he asked.

"In those days, you couldn't tell anyone where you were going, because there were all these connections among the big interests. I went to Philadelphia, and there was Fred Waring, a very good friend of mine. I had learned about the Waring organization when playing at the Tivoli in Chicago. I had a big dressing room there with a piano, and upstairs was a hall where the Pennsylvanians would rehearse. John Balaban asked me to watch the show with him the first time Fred and the boys appeared. We sat in the last row and when he asked my opinion, I said, 'They've got something, no question about it. Keep them.'

"Another time at the Tivoli, if I can be allowed to go out of sequence, Paul Whiteman, a very good friend, told me that a couple kids were coming in from Los Angeles and asked me to hear them. One played the

piano, the other sang. Whiteman was impressed by the singer, who stated he had a cold when they auditioned in Los Angeles. I'll never forget that routine which was named "Two Boys and a Piano." The singer crashed a cymbal during the act, and the song was "Sadie Green From New Orleans." The participants? Al Rinker and Bing Crosby. Bing has never forgotten that incident. This was a big thing for him, and for me, who could always say 'I knew him when . . .'

"Getting back in sequence, I was in Philadelphia, and as I told you, the Mastbaum Theatre Wurlitzer was a great organ. The console rose out of the pit and turned so the organist could see more of the audience. There were 85 men in the pit orchestra; Fabian Sevitsky, a nephew of Koussevitsky, was our conductor; Le Roy Prince, choreographer; Katherine Littlefield, prima ballerina. Dick Powell was master of ceremonies at one time, also Teddy Joyce, who was later killed in a bombing raid in England during World War II. It was a great theatre, but it closed two or three times with labor troubles. Dick Powell was sent out to Hollywood, and you know how well he fared.

"When I came to Philadelphia, Fred Waring told me that I'd hate the city, this coming from a native Pennsylvanian. But I loved it. I loved the people, and I loved the idea of a six-day town.

"And it is here I want to say to the young organist: There is absolutely no substitute for work. I don't care how much talent you have. You can't substitute talent for work. No way. Heifetz can't do it. Some feel they can get by on talent alone, but you must work, work, work! As for me, I loved the business.

(To Be Concluded Next Issue)

The 5,000-seat Mastbaum Theatre about December 1945. Often beset with labor troubles during its history, it was the most beautiful theatre erected in Philadelphia. — (Philadelphia Public Library)

