

The Life and Times of Milton Charles

Transcribed by Lloyd E. Klos

— Conclusion —

The handsome Milton Charles at the CBS microphone in Chicago, around 1940. His big-time radio work started in the Windy City in 1936, and he did such network shows as "Ma Perkins" and "Vic & Sade." — (WBBM-TV Photo)



"In Chicago, the week's show would end on Sunday night. By the next day, you'd have to be ready with a new presentation. You had to change your combinations. You had to rehearse after 12:30 when the house was empty. You had to learn what you were doing. You had to memorize because you didn't use music. Many times, I didn't leave the theatre until 5 a.m. I'd be back by noon. But, this was a part of my life."

At this point, Mary Bowles asked Mr. Charles about the wonderful skits. "I heard one which involved a cowboy, a car and a crescendo pedal. What about that one?"

"As a matter of fact, Mary, until you mentioned it, I had completely forgotten it. We did a lot of things — you mentioned earlier the one about Vallee. That was rather good. I was down at Cape May, (N.J.) and I went over to Atlantic City. That was when Rudy was on his honeymoon, if you can believe this as a place to go. He was there on the beach in a roped-off area. I was swimming, and he hollered, 'Come here! I want you to meet my wife.' I went up there and was so embarrassed by all these people gawking at us, that I said, 'I'll see you later', and left. But, that's Rudy.

"It was a funny thing I dreamed up from that experience. There was a short film made of (me) leaving in my car, and going into the alley by the theatre, through the stage door, and walking right through the scrim, wearing a white suit. We dreamed up things like that."

"And", said Mary, "you played "Million Dollar Baby In a Five & Ten Cent Store" because I was there."

"We had a lot of fun," Charles went

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on. "I remember in Chicago, I had a dear friend, Milton Weil, who had done quite well as a publisher, and had been a representative for Irving Berlin in the earlier days. He also had a thing about horses. He bought one and I heard he was in bad trouble. I went down to the office to see what had had in manuscripts. He had a number called "I'm Looking at the World Through Rose-Colored Glasses." I promised I'd put it on in three weeks at the Tivoli.

"So I introduced it, and had a young tenor, who was pretty good, but people didn't know him. I worked out a routine in which I told the audience that 'I have a friend who goes to the University of Chicago. He has a song which he's written, and if given a little encouragement, he'd come and sing for us.' He did very well, and by the time I got downtown, the thing was a sellout. Milton Weil was in business again. Sheet music was a big thing. This was a big exposure. We didn't have the other media. We had radio — *Amos 'n' Andy* etc. By the time I was through at the Uptown, business was booming for Weil.

"I was in Philadelphia from 1930 to 1934. The contract I had was called a 'play-or-pay' contract. They had to pay me regardless of strikes, theatre closings etc, as long as I was there and available. Once, I went to Europe, rather than just sit around. I told them they wouldn't have to pay me during that time. While overseas, I played at the Granada Tooting Theatre in London. They had an organist there who had played in Buffalo, N.Y. named Harold Ramsay, and the installation was a good Wurlitzer. It was under the stage and the sound came right out at you. I played there until about 4 a.m. for several people, including the big theatre man, Bernstein.

"I returned to the states and when the Mastbaum closed again, I gave them an out as I had a wire from the Chicago Theatre. They still wanted me to stay. I did until the following April when I went to New York and was told to see Boris Morros at the Paramount Theatre. You see what's going to happen?

"I cooled my heels in his outer office . . . nothing for about an hour. That was his little way. I saw him years later out here at the Brown Derby Restaurant with Mr. Bernstein from London. I couldn't resist my impulse, walked over and said, 'You

know, Mr. Bernstein, this is one of the best friends I have. Great man. Knows just what to do when you're in trouble. You can always count on him.'

"One event occurred before that. I was supposed to go to the Capitol Theatre in New York. Louis K. Sidney was a big name, and he called me from New York. My contract was up in Chicago at that time. Sidney offered me the Capitol Theatre at quite a bit of money. So, I accepted it, because I thought it was an advancement. This was verbal, over the phone, and the engagement was for a year. I sub-leased my apartment and moved my family to New York. But, all the time I was in New York, I merely went down and collected my check.

"But, they had a working agreement. Paramount had asked Loew's for Dave Rubinoff, the violinist, and Loew's turned them down. And right on top of it, they took me away. Sam Katz said, 'You can't have him.' It was over Louis Sidney's head which meant Louis B. Mayer. That's how big this was. It wasn't that I was important, it was the idea of the thing. Sidney told me to collect my salary for a year, but you know I wouldn't do that! I was advised to go back and talk to Katz. He hemmed and hawed until my wife said, 'Do you want Milton, or don't you?'

"To punish me, they put me into the Oriental Theatre in Chicago which I loathed. I was there for a six weeks as my 'sentence'. That was before 1929. So, those were the little things they could do. Man, you learn!

"Getting back to the New York experience, I was up at Steinway Hall with Morton Downey. He was doing a broadcast and Walter Preston from CBS in Chicago came to town. We had known each other from my Chicago days, and when he asked if I'd like to go with him to Chicago and join CBS, I said, 'Sure'.

"That's how I got into radio in 1936 in a big way. I had done some in a small way previously. We played many of the soap operas, doing five or six a day, plus sustaining shows." (Editors Note: "Sustaining shows" were studio or network presentations — with no commercial sponsorship.)

Mary Bowles then brought up the three-in-one program with Ann Leaf and Eddie Dunstedter. "Yes, that was called *Three Consoles*, Ann Leaf from New York and Dunstedter from St.

Louis, playing great organs. And when Walter Preston wanted me for the program, I asked what type organ he had. 'Oh, a great big Wurlitzer, brand new.' When I got there, I looked through the peep hole into the studio, and I saw an organ console I had designed for the Gunn School of Music. It had one of everything on a small scale. So that was the one on which I had to compete with the other two and it wasn't easy. They had it installed wrong. Instead of installing it where you had sweep of the long dimension of the studio, they had put it where the sound hit a wall.

"It was an experience, and when the Hammonds came in around 1935, we'd alternate between the Wurlitzer and the Hammond. My concert work and sustaining shows were done on the Wurlitzer. In those days, we had to sustain ten seconds after system, and I had to do two shows in a row in two studios. I did *Ma Perkins* in one studio, sustain ten seconds, and did *Vic & Sade* across the hall. I don't think I'd want to do that today. But, it was fun then.

"Pearl Harbor came, and eventually, I came out here to Los Angeles to CBS, and they had a pretty nice Wurlitzer down there. That is where Ivan Ditmars played. When he left for the service, he had quite a few shows. He called me and said, 'You're the only

Milton Charles autographed this picture for his friend, fellow organist Joe Brite. Photo of this handsome musician was taken in Chicago. — (J. Brite coll.)

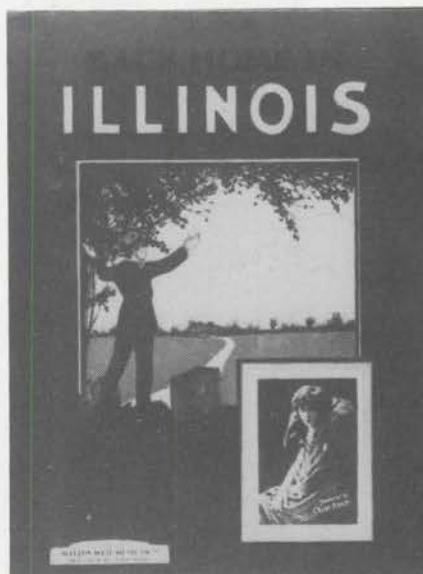


one who's not dancing on my grave. What do you want of mine?" I told him I'd take the *Dr. Christian Show*, but with one condition that I substitute for him only until he got back. I was with that show for 10 years until the end. I always knew that when that show went off, radio was dead. People would go to the phone and ask for Dr. Christian if they were ill. Jean Hersholt was great; so were Rosemary DeCamp and Neil Reagan, the director, who is our governor's brother. We had a nice little family going there.

"When Ivan came back, I called him, asking when he wanted to take over, and he said, 'Keep it; it's yours.' He's done greatly and deservedly so. He's solid and he plays a beautiful piano, too.

"And, let's make note of this: Everybody should have piano. I don't care if you play a harmonica. That's it. Piano is the foundation. And just don't kid about buying an organ and sitting down to play. That's for the people to come home from the office and play. That's great — don't knock it. But when we're talking professionally, you must have a background in piano.

"I don't know if you recall this or not, but we had 200 musicians in the Mastbaum in Philadelphia in a big production; we had the Philadelphia Symphony plus our orchestra of 85. The director once called on me to play



In 1925, Mr. Charles and Sam Stept wrote the music to "Back Home in Illinois", with words by Coleman Goetz. Both writers and organists who plugged the songs, were publicized on sheet music.

the piano — 'a concerto or something.' This man was out of his mind! I told him I couldn't do it! But, I got hold of our arranger, Murray Cutter, told him about the start I made on a composition in Chicago. I worked on it all night, and Murray did a remarkable copy job on it. We had a very brief rehearsal, but it went quite well at the concert. Eric Knight, famous author and the critic on the Philadelphia Ledger, came backstage in praise of the

work, but there was no title to it. I said, 'You name it and you can have it.' In his review, he said, 'Milton Charles played "Noonday Interlude". I did play it again with the Chicago Symphony, but the experience at Philadelphia was really the great one.

"Out here in Los Angeles, they had a rule that you could have only one transcontinental show if you were on staff, so I gave up the staff work. I did free lance work for quite some time.

"I worked with Herbert Marshall in *The Man Called X*. I did another show with John McIntyre for which I wrote the theme. I also did a radio show with Roy Rogers and Dale Evans for a time, in which I used guitar, organ, kettle drum and cymbals.

"I did some work with CBS with unusual combinations such as four French horns, organ and one reed. Good sound! There were also shows with Gene Autry in which I did (pardon the expression), a dramatic portion of the show.

"The organ at CBS was a pretty good instrument. It was put together by Ivan Ditmars out of Seattle. We did a lot of shows on it. One was *Prelude to Midnight* from 11:30 pm to 12, five nights a week over the CBS network. Opposite this on local station KNX was a guy named Steve Allen.

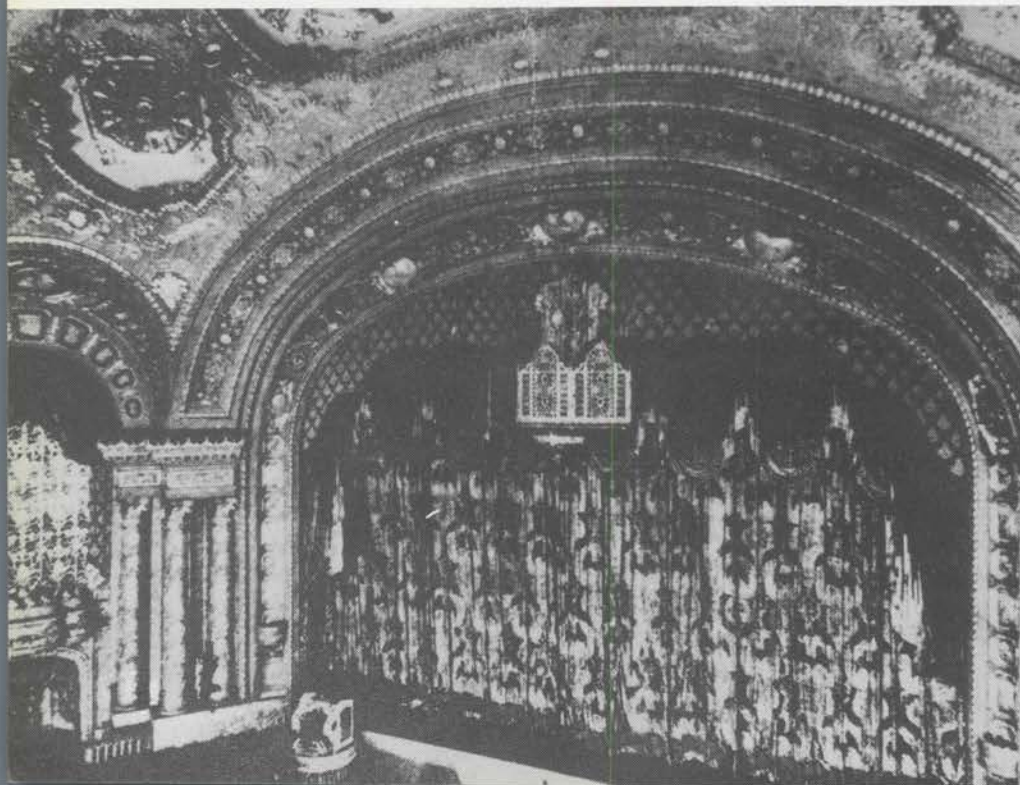
"One of the fellows we saw over at the King's Arms the other night was Roy Williams, an artist for Disney in the old days. His wife recalled the early days on a TV show of mine when Roy drew cartoons. This was at least 20 years ago."

"I believe", said Charles, "that the secret of success is that you must like people. If you don't, forget it. You saw the little fellow, George, who is a banjo player. He offered me \$1500 a week to go to Florida with a banjo outfit. I'm not about to go to Florida. No chance!

"When the King's Arms was opened, my wife advised me to go in to play. I had no experience at all in this sort of place. She went over to the owners and literally sold me to them. They had a piano in there, but I said 'Never! It would be murder to play four hours at a piano. Forget it!'

"I told them I'd bring in an organ, try it out for them, and if they didn't like it, I could go with no hard feelings. They didn't even know who I was; my name just didn't register. People were amazed that they got Milton Charles in there and they began

The Mastbaum's Wurlitzer console rose from the pit and turned so that the organist could better view the audience. The stage was 75 feet wide, and the proscenium arch 60 feet above the stage. Cost of the theatre was \$5,500,000. — (Philadelphia Public Library)



to pay attention. They were giving me odds of two weeks downtown. An old friend I hadn't seen in 20 years, one I had hired to play piano in the mezzanine of the Chicago Theatre, gave me some good advice: 'Don't take anyone's problems to heart. If you do, you'll have as many problems as the bartender and you won't make it.' That was good advice. I have been there 17 years."

Mary then recalled that on the previous night she had watched her favorite organist play at the restaurant from 9:30 until 1:30 without a break, and that he was as fresh when he finished as when he began.

"I don't recommend this — people don't understand how I do it. I don't drink, and what do you do at a break? I talk a bit. But I have a theory that when I'm busy, I feel better. If you don't do anything, you're just exhausted. I don't like to play until my hands ache, but I have done this at times. I'm a relaxed player which helps."

In answer to a question of types of music used for scoring pictures when Milton Charles began theatre work, he answered, "Improvisation entirely. The greatest improviser, and most organists who heard him will agree, was Oliver Wallace. Sid Grauman heard some of us organists talking about Wallace, so he brought him here from Seattle to play in the Rialto on Market Street on a little two-manual Wurliitzer. We all gathered one night to hear him. It was a great experience, especially for me.

"Wallace was a god to Jesse Crawford, and I could see why. We became great friends later on, as he went to work for Disney, and wrote many beautiful things for him. We'd often have lunch at the studio. At night, he'd come over to the King's Arms and listen to me. Such a great man! The music he wrote for Disney was an out-growth of his work as an organist.

"But, as I said, I improvised, playing not violently to take the play from the picture. For a big picture like *Birth of a Nation*, however, I used the score provided. That was obligatory."

We have come to the end of the story of Milton Charles, master organist, as told by the man personally. The American Theatre Organ Society is grateful to Mr. Charles for granting the original interview and THEATRE ORGAN thanks him for the use of the taped interview for this feature. □



Tom Comeaux at the 4/26 Robert Morton, Saenger Theatre, New Orleans.

GOOD NEWS from LOUISIANA

by Dolton McAlpin

It's been quite some time since Louisiana theatre organ activity has been chronicled in these pages. And good things are happening.

Many ATOS members from across the United States have visited the Paramount Theatre in Baton Rouge and have been favorably impressed with the 2/6 Robert Morton there. This organ gained wide notoriety several years ago through two discs released by Concert Recording. Now, after 52 years of continuous operation, the Paramount has received its first full-scale facelift, a stem to stern refurbishing of the venerable old vaudeville house. The theatre was recently closed for the installation of new carpets, screen, curtain and rocking chair seats. Fortunately the management of the Paramount has not succumbed to the economic expediency of draping the theatre, preferring instead to retain the unique flavor of the original decor. Tom Mitchell, manager of the Paramount for 23 years, has been most cooperative in financing major additions to the organ. A console elevator will

soon be installed, and structural alterations have been made to the building to allow the installation of several new ranks: Clarinet, Concert Flute, Orchestral Oboe, String Bass, and a 16' wood Ophecleide.

Meanwhile, on famed Canal Street in New Orleans, interesting things are happening at the 3800 seat Saenger Theatre. The Saenger management has employed Don May of Baton Rouge to completely rebuild the theatre's 4/26 Morton. The Saenger organ was considered by Morton executives to be the finest-sounding installation they ever made. At the time of this writing May has finished repairing the massive water damage which the instrument suffered several years ago, and he hopes that within six months he will have banished the electrical and other problems which typically plague a long-silent organ. The Saenger management is enthusiastically planning to use the organ once the restoration is completed.

The popular organist at the Baton Rouge Paramount is Tom Comeaux. In the four years that he has performed at the Paramount he has earned a wide reputation among Baton Rouge theatre-goers. The Paramount audiences are almost exclusively college-age, and to satisfy their somewhat eclectic tastes Comeaux styles his music in a light, up-beat mod style. In addition to his duties as house organist Tom has found time to become first runner-up in the Mr. Baton Rouge contest as well as to serve as a water-skiing instructor. Comeaux has entertained many organ groups from areas surrounding Baton Rouge. His Sunday morning Paramount concerts have become a hit with organ buffs in the south Louisiana area. Recently Tom performed for 500 members of the New Orleans Hammond Organ Club who travelled to Baton Rouge especially to hear him and the Paramount Morton. Tom is currently preparing to assume console duties at the Saenger when the restoration there is completed, and there is a record in the works on this Morton.

Although there are only two theatre organs now playing in Louisiana, Tom Comeaux and his associates are spreading their infectious enthusiasm for theatre organs, winning new converts and spreading the gospel according to Morton. Chalk up one more victory for the renewed interest in theatre organs. □