

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. □