

# Radio Announcers Spread Theatre Organ Gospel

by Jean Lautzenheiser

**S**ome of the people who are the greatest assets to our Theatre Organ Society are neither organists or pipe organ owners. In the Washington, D.C. - Maryland - Virginia metropolitan area three of our most dedicated TO enthusiasts are radio announcers Tom Gauger, Ed Walker and Willard Scott.

Those of you who attended the '72 Convention will undoubtedly remember Ed and Willard, the "JOY BOYS", and Tom, all of whom appeared briefly with Rosa Rio that hot night at the Virginia Theatre. We heard beautiful and sensitive poetry readings by Tom Gauger, and a JOY BOYS

rendition of their hilarious radio serial *As The Worm Turns*.

WE ARE THE JOY BOYS OF  
RADIO, WE CHASE ELECTRONS  
TO AND FRO!

Ed Walker and Willard Scott have been working in radio as a team for some twenty years. Washington commuters find their rush-hour driving lightened by these two folksy and zany announcers and their imaginary friends. They are heard daily on WWDC.

Unknown to Rosa Rio, Ed and Willard introduced into their act a fictitious organist and named her "Rita

Rosa" several years ago. Ed, who has been blind since birth, provides the falsetto voice of "Rita". When "she" is ready to play the Mighty Wurlitzer, Willard kicks over an old beat-up garbage can. Retrieving the trash can, Willard calls into it, "Are you alright, Rita? My, that was a nasty fall into the pit!"... whereupon "Rita" emerges playing a majestic theatre organ. Later in the program "Rita" is called upon to provide background music for the day's production of *As The Worm Turns* an ad-libbed takeoff on a hospital-type daytime soap opera.

"Rita Rosa's" career was interrupted about three years ago by program directors, causing quite a

furor among her fans. The flood of calls and letters that brought her back included a petition containing several hundred signatures collected by one ATOS member from Virginia.

There was excitement all 'round when Ed Walker and Willard Scott met and interviewed the real Rosa Rio last summer while she was visiting friends in the Washington area. The JOY BOYS found "Rita Rosa's" real-life counterpart to be a most charming and witty lady who was flattered to learn that she has been made famous in the Nation's Capital.

\* \* \*

As a youngster in Tennessee, Tom Gauger enjoyed going to church, but the organ music and the choral anthems gave him particular satisfaction. The son of an Army officer, Tom began his radio experience with the Far East Network. His broadcasting career was launched on the island of Okinawa. While returning from Panama with his parents in the early

The "Joy Boys", WWDC, Washington, D.C. Ed Walker, left, uses a Braille typewriter to prepare his commercials. Willard Scott, right, is as mischievous as he looks. — (Photo courtesy WWDC Radio)





Tom Gauger, ATOS member at work. — (Photo courtesy WMAL Radio)

1950's the Gaugers attended *The Greatest Show On Earth* at the Radio City Music Hall in New York where Tom saw and heard his first theatre organ. Upon arrival back in Memphis, he decided to check out the local theatre in the hopes that there might be a theatre organ there. Sure enough, at the bottom of the pit of the Malco Theatre was a pipe organ — silent, and covered with a canvas. Tom remembers the thrill of lifting the corner of

the canvas and seeing, at close range, a real theatre organ. He went to the theatre many times, but never heard the organ.

A former "Kissin' Cousin" at KYSN radio in Colorado, Tom went to afternoon prime time with WIOD in Miami and in 1968 came to Washington to join WMAL radio as a staff announcer. He has earned many awards and is one of the most popular announcers in the Metropolitan area.

Jean Lautzenheiser and Tom Gauger do a "Turn" at the Virginia Theatre, Alexandria, Va.



A regular feature on the Tom Gauger Show is a number "played by our lovely organist, Rosa Rio, on our 4 manual 32 rank Mighty Wurlitzer." The engineer throws the switch, the roar of a motor and blower lends atmosphere and authenticity, and the "Mighty Wurlitzer" is heard once again. Of course, the pipe organ and Rosa's being at the studio are figments of a vivid imagination. Gauger adds credibility by letting "Rosa" go on vacations to such places as the Atlanta Fox where she sits on the bench as Bob Van Camp plays, or to Richmond's Byrd Theatre to visit Eddie Weaver. Sometimes "Rosa Rio" plays under one of her aliases: Tiny James, Pete Dumser, Everett Nourse . . . it all depends upon the record chosen for the day.

"Rosa" talks to Tom. If he tells "her" she looks nice, "Rosa" replies something like "Oh, well, I do my best." While the organ is rising from the pit, "she" is often heard exclaiming "Here I come! Watch my fingers!" One comment that evokes a chuckle from all ATOS listeners is "Isn't it remarkable how much our Wurlitzer sounds like a Moller today!"

It was a treat for Tom to meet and interview the real Rosa Rio on his radio program at the time of the ATOS Washington meeting in 1972. Miss Rio graciously approved of her 10:45 a.m. daily radio spot.

A valued member of the Potomac Valley Chapter, Tom dreams of having a theatre pipe organ of his own someday. He gives credit on the air to the chapter for tuning the fictitious studio organ and he speaks knowledgeably about toy counters, ciphers, wind chests, etc. Tom is responsible for generating considerable public interest in our cause. His appearances at the Virginia Theatre in Alexandria have helped promote the Woody Wise Grande Barton and ATOS. This debonaire young man contributes greatly to the entertainment world with his sparkling personality and a sincere interest in all kinds of people and music.

Washington was an excited city the day before the Redskins football team played in the Super Bowl. Tom added to the enthusiasm by dialing the Lautzenheisers and having Jean play "Hail to the Redskins" on the Wurlitzer via phone, over the air. It was the type of appropriate spur-of-the-moment thing that makes his show so successful. □