

THE SHOWPLACE OF THE SOUTH

Sign over the Box Office gives an inkling as to what's inside. — (Billy C. Evans Photo)

by Alleen Cole

Tur story begins in late 1927. There is a buzz of activity on 3rd Avenue between 18th and 19th streets in Birmingham, Alabama. This city of 217,500 anxiously awaits the opening of the Alabama Theatre, the newest and most fabulous theatre to be built in Birmingham, now nearing completion.

Material for this theatre had been coming from all over the world; Italy, France, Belgium, Tennessee, Alabama, Wisconsin, Florida, Louisiana, Minnesota and Ohio.

The theatre was built by the Publix Theatres Corporation of New York City with the Thompson-Starrett Company, builders of the famous Paramount Theatre in New York City as general contractors. Charles F. Hutchings was the superintendent in charge under the personal direction of A. G. Moulton, Thompson-Starrett's vice president.

Watching all this construction was young Norville Hall. He was seventeen and an usher at the Strand Theatre, the number one Publix Theatre in the city. During the construction, Norville became acquainted with a Mr. Blackman, overseer of all properties of the theatre. It didn't take Mr. Blackman long to realize that Norville had more than a young boy's curiosity about big construction. He was keenly interested in the objects of art, the many beautiful pieces of carved furniture, pictures and statues going into the theatre.

One night, Norville went to visit Mr. Blackman after closing the Strand. Mr. Blackman was all smiles as he motioned for Norville to follow him down near the orchestra pit where stood a huge crate marked "Wurlitzer". Mr. Blackman got a hammer and crowbar and together they pulled some planks loose, just enough to get a peek at the huge four-manual red and gold console. Norville's first impression was that it was awfully gaudy and the most monstrous instrument he had ever seen. He was familiar with the five-manual Kimball in the auditorium in Memphis, but somehow this seemed bigger. Norville couldn't even touch the keys or stops. The boards were carefully replaced to keep the console safe until time to complete installation.

A long week passed. Finally, Norville walked into the theatre and there sat the console with all the fancy decor surrounding it. Now it seemed beautiful. Gaudy? Yes, but rightfully so. He was almost overcome as he looked at the spectacular sight. He sat at the console and wistfully fingered the keys, but still could not play it.

The night the organ was completed Norville was the first to try it out. Later he recalls that this was probably the greatest musical moment of his life as he had played until the wee hours of the morning.

On Christmas morning, the Birmingham *News-Age Herald* featured headlines "Birmingham Gets

\$1,500,000 Christmas Gift in Alabama Theatre". This two-page article announced the official opening of the theatre on December 26, with brilliant programs and an elaborate ceremony.

At last, the theatre had opened. The throngs entered the theatre through the double box office with automatic ticket seller machines designed to eliminate long waiting lines. The lobbies were planned to avoid drafts on those seated in the theatre and also to eliminate any crowding of patrons going in or coming out through the use of several spillways.

The design and construction of the theatre is basically Spanish; with a fusing of the Western European or Christian art with Asiatic, African or Moorish art. The design was not confined to any one particular period, but an effort was made to use the most pleasant motifs and those that would lend themselves most attractively to the modern adaptation of the style. The building is in general a replica of the Paramount Theatre in New York, and has been recognized as the finest, most artistic theatre in the South, thus winning it the title, "Showplace of the South".

Entering the ticket lobby, the public then passes through the Hall of Mirrors, a high two-story marble-walled room. The sides and ceilings are composed of a series of paneled mirrors. At the far end of the room, a stairway leads to a spacious balcony above the grand lobby. The long side-

walls are divided by pilasters of rose tavernelle marble with verde antique dies and bases. Iron gates separate the lobby from the auditorium proper and form the initials of the theatre name, combined in such a way as to form an effective pattern. In passing through these gates, one enters the auditorium foyer.

The auditorium, which seats 2527 in upholstered spring seats, is decorated in Spanish motif — with simulated windows indirectly lighted on each side. Highly ornamented plaster treatment is intensified around the organ grills and proscenium arch — with indirect light on a dimmer system to lend color and emphasis. When seated in the last row of the top balcony, the viewer is 147 feet from the screen. The proscenium opening is 42 feet wide. There are a total of 50

sets of lines for handling hanging scenery.

As the throngs milled around this "Palace of Splendor" on opening day, the house lights were on, and in spite of all the dazzling beauty of the theatre, there was nothing to compare with the beauty of the Mighty four-manual Wurlitzer console perched majestically on an elevator lift, being played by a gracious young lady named Lillian Truss. (Mrs. Truss played a two-hour concert prior to the opening ceremonies.)

The theatre opened under the management of Mr. Sidney Dannenberg, who had come to Birmingham only two years prior as manager of the Strand and Galax Theatres, both Publix houses. Mr. Dannenberg had previously managed the Criterion Theatre in New York for many years, and later

managed the Metropolitan Theatre of Boston.

The formal opening, which began at 1:05 P.M. on December 26, 1927, featured Esther Ralston in "Spotlight", a Paramount Picture with Neil Hamilton. There was also a stage play, *Banjomania* with a brilliant array of Broadway entertainers. Ralph Pollock was master of ceremonies. The Alabama Grand Orchestra was also presented with Bruce Brummitt, conductor. Joe Alexander was at the Wurlitzer and played a medley to show off the organ. He had been featured organist at several Chicago Theatres before coming to the Alabama.

Mrs. Truss and Mr. Alexander shared the limelight at the Wurlitzer for about a year with Mrs. Truss doing the picture work and Mr. Alexander the solo work. When Mr. Alexander left, Mrs. Truss did the solo work for another year. Then the "talkies" came, and Mrs. Truss, as well as the orchestra, was given notice.

It was several years before the organ was again used just for solo work. Records pertaining to the organists are no longer available, and all information had to be obtained through correspondence with the several organists still living today. One of the first was Orville Erwin, who eventually became known as Lee Erwin of the famed Arthur Godfrey shows. Mr. Erwin is known to ATOS members for his continued work with silent movies.

Time marches on, and a parade of stars played the Wurlitzer. Those best remembered are Gladys Lyle, Malcom Tate, Randy Sauls, Jessee Walker, Marie Elliott, Stanleigh Malotte and Charlie Cox.

Like Lee Erwin, Randy Sauls has continued his organ work and his name is well known to ATOS members. Randy now lives in California and is teaching in the Los Angeles School District and Pasadena City College. He says that of all the organs he has played, the Alabama is his favorite.

Probably the best remembered to Birmingham audiences is Stanleigh Malotte, brother of the late Albert Hay Malotte — another well-known theatre organist and composer of the famous setting to the "Lords Prayer".

Charlie Cox, another well remembered artist, played at the Alabama for about 14 years. He is particularly remembered for his performances at the Miss Alabama pageants during

Interior of the Alabama Theatre.



those years. Mr. Cox has retired from playing, but continues his interest in organ through his ownership in music stores in Orlando, Florida.

This brings us to Jay Mitchell, the present organist at the Alabama. Jay was appointed organist in 1971. He is no novice, having studied with Stanleigh Malotte in his teens and then going on to New York City where he studied for several years. He has done night club work, concerts, church work, is a teacher, and presently is associated with a music store in Huntsville, Alabama. His style is very much like that of Stanleigh Malotte, and like Malotte he is able to coax the very best from the old instrument.

As did thousands of theatre organs across the nation, the Alabama Wurlitzer seemed destined to deteriorate through lack of proper maintenance, and infrequent use. It was through the efforts of ATOS that this famous organ was granted a reprieve. The basic idea of restoring the Alabama Wurlitzer was that of the late Ben Hall. As a result of an inspection of the organ by Mr. Hall and Joe Patten of Atlanta, permission was given the Southeastern Chapter of ATOS by Mr. Norris Hadaway of the Wilby-Kincey Company, operators of the Alabama and the Atlanta Fox theatres, to perform a limited amount of refurbishment. It was understood that the Alabama Theatre would purchase a modest amount

of needed materials but all labor would be contributed by members of the Southeastern Chapter of ATOS.

Mr. Patten prevailed upon Mack Watson of Atlanta to head up a group to rebuild the organ. In early April, 1968, work began. First efforts were concentrated in "chasing" dead notes in the organ and generally cleaning out the relay and blower room in the basement which was filled with many years accumulation of coal dust. They found many dead magnets in the relay and switch stacks.

In mid April, 1968, the Southeastern Chapter had a meeting at the Alabama. Atlanta's Bob Van Camp and Birmingham's Charlie Cox played a program, and as a result of their struggle to get through the program, it was decided that a total rebuild of the console would be undertaken. All of the "innards" were taken to Atlanta leaving behind only the combination action setter boards and the stop action windchests (each having many dead magnets that needed replacing).

Assisting Mr. Watson was Blake Braley, Robert Hill, Clay Holbrook, Charles Walker, and Arli Southerland. Every square inch of the console's exterior was painstakingly repainted by Mr. Walker.

The console was completely rebuilt, including the recovering of manual keys, complete re-wiring, re-tubing the pneumatic air supply, re-leathering and



Draped balcony window in the main lobby is the manager's office. — (Billy C. Evans Photo)

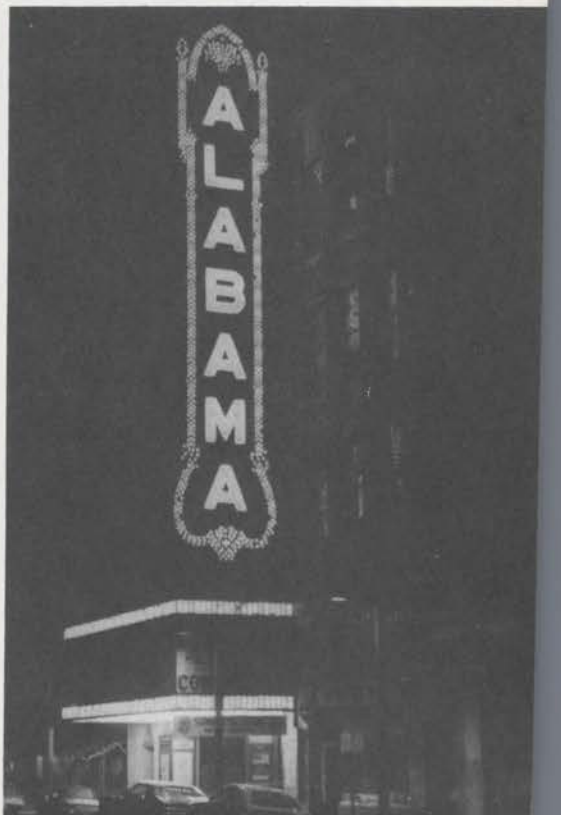
re-felting the entire console. Every part was refurbished right down to the replacement of the rubber treads on the swell pedals.

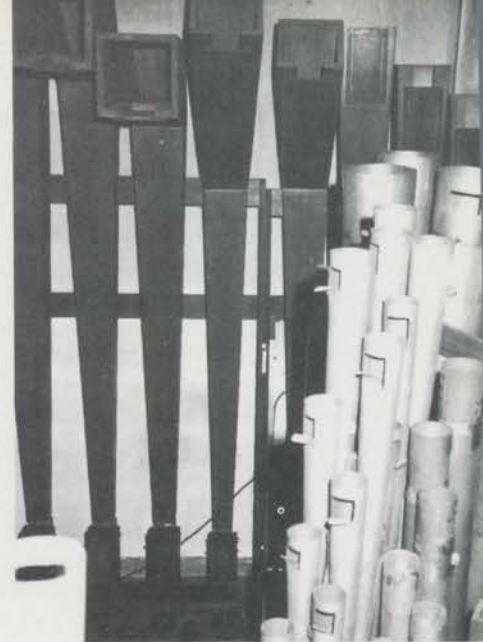
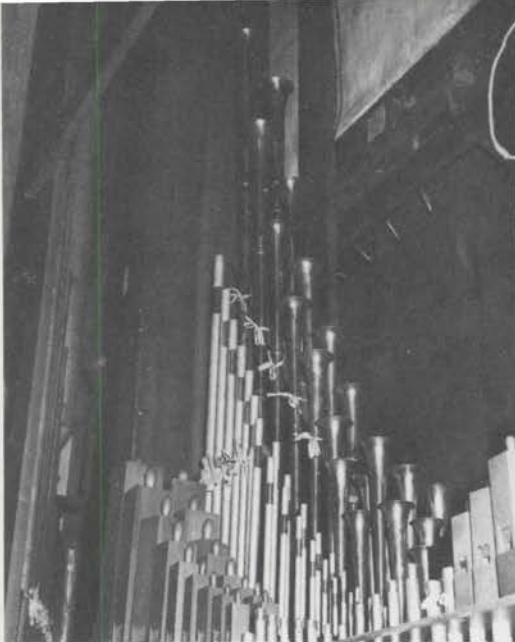
Because of personal expenses incurred by these people both in time as well as money, it was decided to try to find someone in Birmingham to take over the project. Jay Mitchell expressed a willingness to take over and gave freely of his time during the last few visits of the Atlanta group, their last one being in February, 1971.

The Alabama Wurlitzer is a 4/20 Crawford Special, Opus 1783 shipped 11/11/27. The highly decorated console in a Moroccan motif, was an early effort to match the decor of the theatre — (Photo by Billy C. Evans)



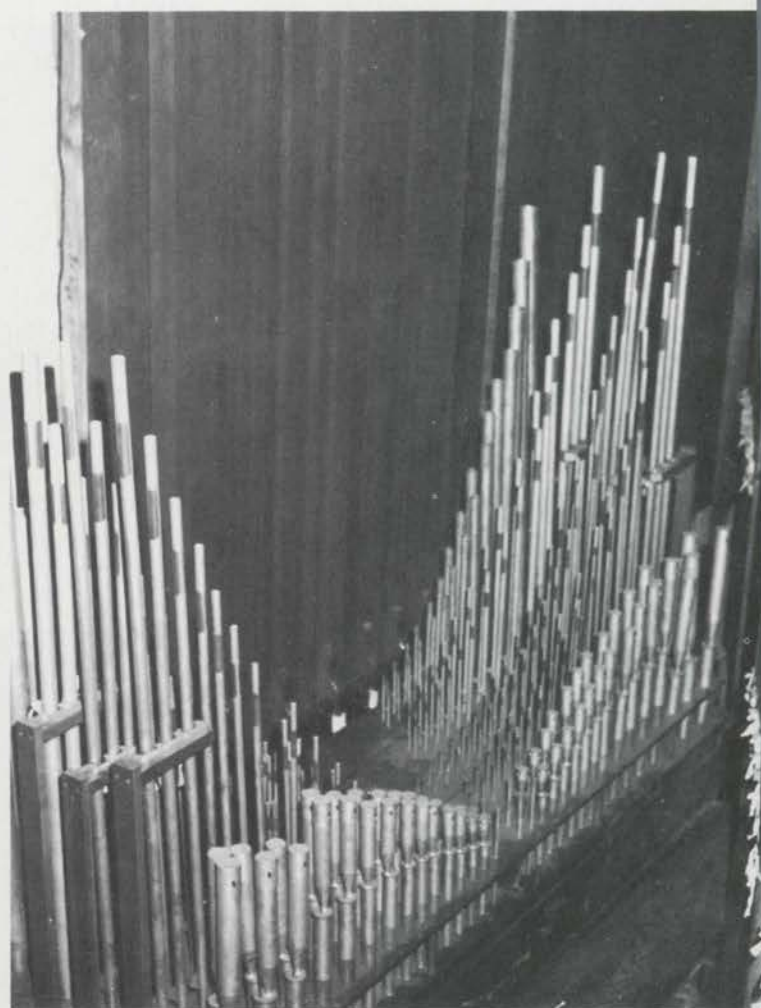
Vertical sign above the Alabama Theatre marquee. — (Billy C. Evans Photo)





Showplace Pipes

Candid shots of pipework in the famous
Alabama "Crawford Special" Wurlitzer.
(Photos by Billy C. Evans)





Randy Sauls at the Alabama Theatre in 1933.

Jay, assisted by Allan Norton and Jerry Adcox worked many hours both at home and in the theatre. As time went on, Jim Harris, Daniel Liles, Chuck Hancock and Larry Donaldson joined the work crew.

In February, 1973, the new Alabama Chapter of ATOS was formed (See June, 1973 issue of THEATRE ORGAN) and a new work crew organized. Because Jay Mitchell had by this time moved to Huntsville, Alabama and was not always available for work sessions, Larry Donaldson headed up the new crew.

Few people are as dedicated to any project as Larry has been to the restoration of this organ. Without him the work might have stopped or cer-

tainly would have slowed to a crawl. He has been very ably assisted by Frank Barksdale, Travis Cavnar, Don Cole, Ellis Dunnivant, Daniel Liles, Cecil Prescott, and Bruce Rockett. Norville Hall has tuned the organ. Riedel West and Alleen Cole have even joined the crew.

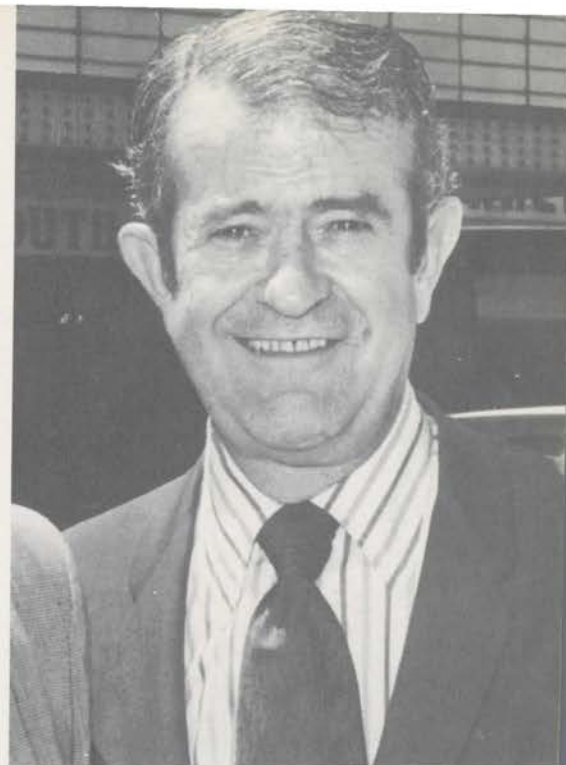
We cannot end our story without mentioning that the two stars who first played the organ are very active members of the Alabama Chapter of ATOS. In addition to picture work, Mrs. Truss was organist at the Bluff Park Methodist Church in Birmingham for 38 years. Now in her 73rd year, Mrs. Truss has not forgotten how to coax music from the old instrument.

Norville Hall gave up a chance to become organist at the theatre in order to continue his music education in Chicago. An organ technician, he owns and operates Norville Hall and Associates, Organ Builders. His ability to handle the instrument has not waned over the years, and his playing reflects his feeling that there is still no other to compare with this gaudy but beautiful organ.

The Alabama Chapter today is active and enthusiastic. It is rapidly growing under the capable leadership of Riedel West, Jay Mitchell and Alleen Cole.

Many tourists whiz by this city of 300,000 and never know the Alabama exists. But to the citizens of Birmingham, the huge vertical sign with the word, "Alabama" equally impressive by daylight or aglow with lights at night, rises like a monument to the glories of the past. Its ageless design blends with the present, and will be equally impressive in the future.

The Alabama could have met the



Cecil Brown, manager of the Alabama.

same fate as many other movie houses in Birmingham and across the country but for the able management of Mr. Cecil Brown who came to the Alabama in 1969 to manage the Wilby-Kincey Theatres. In the theatre business for 31 years, Mr. Brown started as an usher and worked his way through the ranks.

Mr. Brown's own personal interest in the restoration and preservation of the Mighty Wurlitzer, and his wholehearted cooperation with ATOS has been responsible for making this organ available to theatre organ enthusiasts in Alabama, who might otherwise never get a chance to see, hear, or play the last remaining theatre organ in the state. □

Jay Mitchell, organist at the Alabama since 1971.



Charlie Cox at the Alabama Wurlitzer in 1969. He played there 14 years.

