

# THEATRE ORGANISTS ON RADIO

by Lloyd E. Klos

**M**uch has appeared in these pages about the organist who played in the theatres and deservedly so. For it was the function of the theatre musician to accompany the silents, to play overtures with the orchestra, sing-alongs, and to ride his profusely decorated console up into the golden spotlight in majestic grandeur to be featured in a solo spot.

But what about the organist who played on the radio network shows? What were some of the programs which are remembered for their organ music? In the following, I hope to twitch the memories of the older readers and to give the younger generation an idea of the extent that organ music was heard on the air waves of yesterday.

It is unknown to me who the first

network organist was. Radio broadcasting began in November 1920, with the Westinghouse station in Pittsburgh, KDKA, providing the first big broadcast — the Harding-Cox election returns. However, one early program over which an organ was featured was the *Eve-ready Hour*. This was the first variety show on radio, and premiered on December 4, 1923. It used many of the stars of that era — John Drew, Eddie Cantor, Will Rogers, Elsie Janis, Weber & Fields, Irvin S. Cobb and many others. The January 1929 issue of *The Diapason* stated: "Mr. Lew White, founder and director of the White Institute, had the honor of broadcasting an hour of organ music on Christmas Eve from his studio for the *Eve-ready Hour*. Ten million persons

heard the program over WEAf (N.Y.) and 26 affiliated stations on a nationwide hookup by means of short-wave broadcasting." Twenty-six stations by today's standards is nothing, but in those days, it was phenomenal.

Perhaps the most famous network show to use a pipe organ was Pepsodent's (later Campbell Soup's) *Amos 'n' Andy*. Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll debuted over Chicago's WGN in the Drake Hotel on January 12, 1926 as *Sam & Henry*. When the show moved to Los Angeles and changed networks, it was not permitted to use the original title. So, it was changed to *Amos 'n' Andy* and that name premiered on March 19, 1928. Several organists did the show during its lifetime, but the most famous was Mr. Flicker Fingers himself, Gaylord Carter, who played it every weekday night from 1935 to 1942.

The theme was "The Perfect Song" which was written for the score of the 1915 classic movie *Birth of a Nation*, and Gaylord played it twice a night; once for the eastern part of the country and later for the west. He says, in retrospect, that his mother always advised him to open his concert with a piece he knows. So, at all his appearances, "The Perfect Song" is played first. Who can forget the announcer of the show with the peerless diction, Bill Hay, introducing "the boys" with "here they ah!"

Of course, the immortal Jesse Crawford was known for his program *Royal's Poet of the Organ*, sponsored by Royal Typewriter on Sunday evenings in the early thirties. The broadcasting was

Perhaps the most famous radio program to use pipe organ music was "Amos 'n' Andy". The organist on that program from 1935 to 1942 was Gaylord Carter, pictured here at Rochester's Auditorium Theatre Wurlitzer — (L. Klos collection)





Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, the famous Amos 'n' Andy. Theirs was probably the most famous program on radio to use organ music.

done using the 4/21 Wurlitzer in a studio on the 14th floor of the Paramount Building in New York.

That organ, now the property of ATOS charter member, Dick Loderhose, was heard by more people than any broadcasting organ. Fred Feibel, Ann Leaf, Winters & West, Fats Waller, Don Baker all used it. Feibel played it for 7½ years on his *Organ Reveille* show. Ann Leaf for a time, opened and closed the CBS network with her *Ann Leaf At the Organ* and *Nocturne* shows. It was also featured on the program *Three Consoles* – Ann Leaf, Eddie Dunstedter over KMOX in St. Louis, and Milton Charles in Chicago. This program was revolutionary for remote-control radio.

There was a network show, originating in Chicago during the thirties, which went on the weekday air at 5:45 PM, EST, *Little Orphan Annie*. The organist, a big Swede, Larry

Larson, played the theme for several years. You older readers remember the Wurlitzer's accompanying announcer Pierre Andre who sang:

Who's that little chatterbox?

The one with pretty auburn locks?

Whom do you see?

It's Little Orphan Annie!

There was more, with the Wurlitzer's simulating the bark of Annie's dog, Sandy, at the precise moment. How we youngsters faithfully drank our Ovaltine so we could send the inside seal of an Ovaltine can for a shaker or decoder ring!

How we loved the organ music for Tenderleaf Tea's *One Man's Family*. It was played by Paul Carson from

Jesse Crawford at the 4/21 Wurlitzer in the N.Y. Paramount Studio. This organ was heard by more persons than any other broadcasting organ. — (L. Klos collection)





Most people do not realize that Thomas "Fats" Waller also played the pipe organ very well. He used the N.Y. Paramount studio instrument for some of his broadcasts.

1932 to 1951. "Destiny Waltz" was the first theme until Carson wrote "Patricia" which was played from 1941 to 1959. Another fine announcer, Frank Barton, still active on TV, was used. When Carson left the show, he was succeeded in turn by Sybil Chism and Martha Green. There were 3,256 episodes, involving 134 books, all "dedicated to the mothers and fathers of the younger generation and to their bewildering offspring," written by Carlton E. Morse.

From his home in Jalisco, Mexico, I received a note from Paul Carson not long ago. He says that although he is retired, he is still busy. "I gave two recitals in Seattle in July 1967. Those will be the last."

Carlton Morse apparently liked organ music, for it was used to introduce another of his shows, *I Love A Mystery*, featuring the adventures of Jack Packard, Doc Long and Reggie Yorke. The organist was again Paul Carson, and the lovely "Valse Triste" by Jan Siebelius was the theme. When Carson was on vacation, Gaylord Carter would substitute for him.

In the thirties, quiz shows were becoming popular on the networks. *Information Please*, *Quiz Kids*, *Professor Quiz* and *Kay Kyser's Kollege of Musical Knowledge* were well known. But, *Dr. I.Q.*, *the Mental Banker* was a favorite from a theatre organ standpoint. The show toured the country, appearing for several weeks in a major city at a large theatre having a pipe

organ, for the good doctor always used organ music to open and close the show.

Who can forget "the little monument to memory, the thought-twister" or the "biographical sketch of a famous personality." Through assistants with portable microphones stationed throughout the theatre, silver dollars went to "that lady in the balcony" or Snickers, Mars Bars, Milky Ways or Forever Yours and "two tickets to next week's production here at the Capitol Theatre" went to "that gentleman on my right downstairs." Announcer Alan C. Anthony's syrupy

voice whetted the sweet tooth, and Lew Valentine (later Jimmy McClain), enriched winning contestants' pockets.

In the thirties, the Philco Super Herodynes and the Stromberg-Carlsons (there were nothing finer) were picking up "Claire de Lune", the theme of a program out of Cincinnati's WLW, "Moon River" which featured organist Lee Erwin. The program began in 1933 and lasted until 1944. The station had three Wurlitzers and Lee worked with the DeVore Sisters, Doris Day, Rosemary and Betty Clooney and Andy Williams.

It was a program of songs and

### THEATRE ORGAN FEATURED ...

Atwater Kent, a great name in early radio receivers, used the theatre organ sound to promote their new (1929) electro-dynamic radios. The ad reproduced on this page was taken from the Rochester, New York, DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE Sunday issue of February 10, 1929 by Lloyd Klos.

The ad copy says, in part: "Whatever music any instrument is capable of playing — it's reproduced by the new Atwater Kent Electro-Dynamic... even the grand organ, which has the widest range of all" ... The ad goes on to say that the lowest to highest notes are not omitted or exaggerated.

The console pictured closely resembles the New York Paramount Wurlitzer and properly so since the Paramount Studio instrument was no doubt the leading broadcast organ in those great radio years.

Thousands of Atwater Kent, Fada, Zenith, Spartan, Majestic and Radiola radios helped greatly in bringing national fame to Jesse Crawford, Ann Leaf, Fred Feibel, and others on the national radio networks.



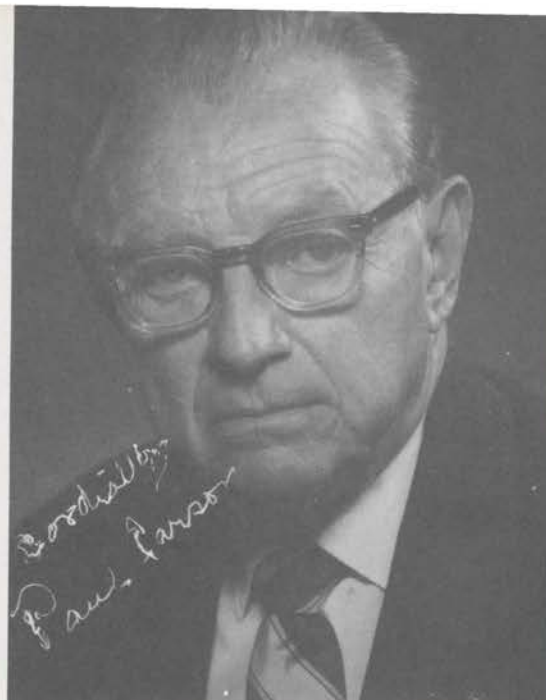
The Mighty Mite of the Mighty Wurlitzer, Ann Leaf at the New York Paramount Studio Wurlitzer. She opened and closed the CBS network for a time with "Ann Leaf At the Organ" and "Nocturne". — (L. Klos collection)

music for easy nighttime listening. The announcer, of which there were several during the show's run, opened with these words: "Moon-River, a lazy stream of dreams, where vain desires forget themselves in the loveliness of sleep. Moon River, enchanted white ribbon, twined in the hair of night, where nothing is but sleep". Later, Erwin served as organist on the Arthur Godfrey shows of many years. Now, he is a free-lance arranger, writer and concert artist.

Canada was not without its broadcasts which utilized pipe organ music, and there were several which lasted beyond World War II. Roland Todd had a Saturday night program which followed the famous *Memory Music Hall*, hosted by Gerald Peters on a Toronto station. If memory serves, it was CBL. Katherine Stokes had a daily stint on *The Happy Gang*. Quentin MacLean broadcast from Shea's Theatre in downtown Toronto, using the 3/15 Wurlitzer which was recently installed in the famed Casa Loma. MacLean's theme was "When the Lights of London Shine Again," and his announcer was the man with the highly resonant voice, Don Sims.

I have been talking about shows which were beamed to the networks. Of course, there were hundreds of local organ shows, and it would be a super-human task to list all of these which featured the mighty Wurlitzers, magnificent Marr & Coltons, silver-voiced Kilgens or the golden-voiced Bartons.

DECEMBER, 1973



Paul Carson who played "One Man's Family" and "I Love A Mystery", both originated by Carlton A. Morse. — (L. Klos collection)

When Laurens Hammond introduced his electronic in 1935, it presaged the end for pipe organs in radio broadcasting. And with it, came the soap opera, with all the networks devoting their daily prime time to them. Some organists would run from studio to studio to provide the themes and background music.

Radio City Music Hall's Jack Ward played for *The Magnificent Montague* which starred Monty Willey. "Aunt Jenny's" theme was done by Elsie Thompson. Dick Leibert was a fixture on Rinso's *Big Sister*, John

Gart on *Bright Horizon*. Perhaps the two busiest organists in those days were Ann Leaf and Rosa Rio.

Ann Leaf, who had to run several blocks a couple times a day for CBS and NBC commitments, played for such shows as *Lorenzo Jones*, *Easy Aces*, *Vic & Sade*, *Pretty Kitty Kelly* and others. Rosa Rio, also helping the profits of Goodyear, did such shows as *Between the Bookends* with Ted Malone, *Cavalcade of America*, *Court of Missing Heirs*, *Myrt & Marge*, *The Shadow* and others.

Who can forget the Lassie show

Eddie Dunstedter at the console of WCCO organ in Minneapolis. When he was in St. Louis, Eddie was one of "Three Console" artists. — (L. Klos collection)





Jimmy McClain (left) and Alan C. Anthony get ready to do a broadcast of *Dr. IQ* in Rochester, October 1944. — (L. Klos collection)

with John Duffy playing the music, or *Mr. Keen*, *Tracer of Lost Persons*, with John Winters at the console. *The Road of Life* and *Young Dr. Malone* had Charles Paul as organist. *Smile Time* used the artistry of Skitch Henderson. Yes, Skitch was an organist long before his work on the *Tonight* TV show.

Here were a few other shows which utilized organ music for themes and background:

*Adventures of the Falcon* with Les Tremayne. "Yes, this is the Falcon speaking . . . Sorry, I can't make it tonight, angel . . ."

*House of Mystery* with Roger Elliott, the mystery man.

*Valiant Lady* with Joan Blaine.

*Tom Mix and his Ralston Straightshooters*.

*Life Can Be Beautiful* with Chi-Chi and Papa David.

*Boston Blackie* — "Friend of those who need a friend; enemy to those who make him an enemy."

*The Guiding Light*

*Mark Trail*

*Against the Storm*

*Backstage Wife*

*Nick Carter, Master Detective*

*Lorenzo Jones*

*Ma Perkins* with Virginia Payne who played the title role during the

entire life of the program.

*Bulldog Drummond* — "Out of the fog, out of the night and into his American adventures comes Bulldog Drummond."

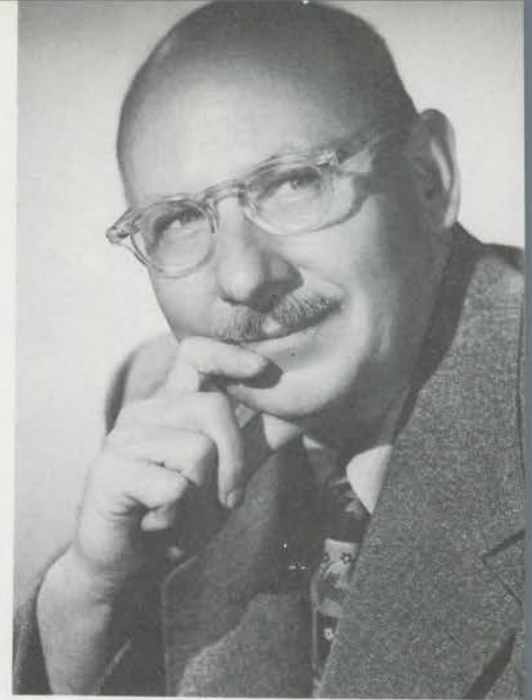
Perhaps a number of readers residing in the metropolitan New York area recall a program, aired on a local station, called *Famous Fathers* in which a celebrity would be interviewed. Providing the music was organist Eddie Baker, now western New York's favorite theatre organist. "That was quite a production", he recalls. "Subjects included aviator Clarence Chamberlain, Harry Carey, Lowell Thomas, Morton Downey, comedian Harry Langdon, Eddie Cantor, Ozzie Nelson, Nick Kenny and Lauritz Melchior. Admiral Byrd recounted his adventures, and was an easy man to talk with."

For seven years in the forties, the *Jack Berch Show*, advertised as "The Shortest 15 Minutes in Radio" and sponsored by Prudential Insurance, was aired daily. It included announcer Eddie Dunn, singer Jack Berch, accordionist Charles Magnante, guitarist Tony Mottola, and a talented organist George Wright. Theme song was "Are You Listening?"

Following World War II until the advent of television, a few organists continued to be employed by the networks. Lew White provided all the background music for *Inner Sanctum*. Who can forget the squeaking door and "your host Raymond (Raymond Edward Johnson) welcoming the listeners with that eerie voice of his. The ½-hour program was aired on Monday nights.

When he returned from naval service where he played Hammonds for the troops stationed on Adak in the Aleutians during World War II, Gaylord Carter returned to the networks in a daily program called *Bride & Groom*. It was Gaylord's duty to play wedding music, playing it "low and grin". John Nelson was the announcer who directed the couples "out the door to our chapel in the garden" under a shower of gifts.

When television came, it ended many, if not most, of the radio programs with live music. Some of the organists were retained. One was ATOS concert favorite Ashley Miller, who still provides the background for *Search For Tomorrow*, a daily soap. George Wright is featured on ABC programs emanating from the west coast. Perhaps the most popular TV organist on the



Carlton E. Morse, creator of "One Man's Family" and "I Love a Mystery" programs which used organ music exclusively. — (L. Klos collection)

networks today is young Bob Ralston who gets ample exposure each week on the Lawrence Welk Show. Wunaful!

The radio shows mentioned are not but a memory now to those of us who grew up during that wonderful era. There were others, of that I'm sure. But how much more enjoyable and memorable they were because they utilized the artistry of the experts with manual, stop tab and pedal. □

"Now everybody ready for Oxydol's own Ma Perkins, America's Mother of the Air", said the introduction on radio. Here is Virginia Payne, who played the starring role during the entire life of the program.

