

NO PLANS TO RETIRE!

Thru the Years With DON BAKER

As told to Lloyd E. Klos

Though he has a gold card from the musicians' union, symbolizing 50 years of professional musicianship, Don Baker still retains the youthful appearance. He doesn't plan to retire, ever, which is good news for organ lovers everywhere.



"I was born in a little town in Ontario, Canada called St. Thomas. When I was one year old, my parents decided to move west, and I decided to go with them. We located in a little town called Lumsden near Regina, the provincial capital of Saskatchewan.

"At the age of eight, I began to study the piano with the only music teacher there was in that small town. Then, my dad decided he would like to move to an even smaller town, as he operated general stores.

"We moved to Calgary, Alberta, Armistice Day, November 11, 1918. There I took up piano again, studying with a man named Dr. Rogers. Now and then, I would play piano professionally for afternoon teas etc., as I had not yet seen an organ, let alone touch one.

"When I was 20, I decided I would like to go to New York City and study serious organ. Arriving in March 1923, I found out the cost of organ lessons was going to be a bit prohibitive, so I took a job as a pit pianist through a man I was lucky enough to meet at the musician's union. I played in the 6-piece pit band in the Flushing Theatre, and the leader of the band would lay out the score for the silent movies.

"In those days, it was not considered that comedy was very important — a one-reeler or two-reeler, and so we just played standard orches-

Editor's Note: After his election into the Theatre Organists' Hall of Fame at the ATOS Convention in Seattle in July 1971, Don Baker was asked to tell the story of his career.

FEBRUARY, 1974

trations during the comedy and concentrated on doing a good job on the feature movie.

"For the feature, the conductor owned a library and if he had time, and if the film arrived on time, he would look at it then lay out the right music for it.

"Those of us who played the organ also had our own library. There was a thing called The Belwyn Motion Picture Library, and we would buy \$5 or \$10 worth of music, or whatever we could afford, as the weeks went by.

"Then, we would watch the movie, usually for the first time through, and improvise the whole thing, drawing upon our musical background which we had in our minds. The second time, we played the movie, we would lay out the score for ourselves.

"They were great days. They were wonderful days, and I taught myself to play the organ while working at it and making a living at it.

"After a couple years, I went to the Rialto and the Rivoli theatres in New York where Erno Rapee, who was the musical director and conductor at both, instituted what he called 'classical jazz'. This was where one of the men in the pit band (usually a 20-piece band) would stand and play 4 or 8 bars, or maybe a whole chorus. Mr. Rapee was an expert, of course, at scoring a movie, and at both theatres, we had the advantage of the scores he laid out.

"At both theatres, when it came time for the organist to take over to give the band a break, the score which lay on the organ music rack was already laid out, and I would come in at the appointed time and pick up with the band on the same tune which they were playing. They would fade out, and I would take over while they had their rest. Then, we would reverse the process, they would take over from me and go on from there.

"In 1928, the Brooklyn Paramount opened, and sound movies were just beginning to come in. In those days, some of the sound was on film and some on 16" records. The records, of course, were a bit scratchy at times, and so we had to play very softly under the sound which was coming from the screen.

"At the Brooklyn Paramount, I also played two half-hour concerts; one at 11 A.M., the other at about 5 P.M., as well as playing parts in the show. Sound continued to improve in scope

and quality, and, of course, the silent movies were dead. With them went a lot of fine actors whose voices were not adequate for the modern screen.

"From the Brooklyn Paramount, I went to the Staten Island Paramount for about two years, and then I had a chance to go to England. So my wife and I, plus two daughters who were then 3 and 5, went abroad for 18 months.

"I played at five of the Bernstein Theatre Corp. theatres and broadcast weekly over the BBC. We seem to think nowadays that a lot of microphones are very much to be desired in picking up sound. But over there, the BBC put one microphone in the middle aisle of the theatre and the sound was fine.

"During our stay in England, we had to make sure that the doorman kept the front door of the theatre closed as much as possible because during a real bad fog (and this is unbelievable), the fog could enter the theatre and become so dense that the screen would be barely visible from the back of the house!

"Coming back to America, I returned to the Staten Island Paramount and while there, I had a chance to go to radio station WOR which was then a 50,000-watt station, the most powerful in the New York City area. While there, Mr. Whiteman, who was the manager of the Brooklyn Paramount when I was there earlier, asked me if I would like to come to midtown New York. The Manhattan Paramount was

Don Baker poses in full dress at the Paramount Studio Wurlitzer. — (L. Klos collection)



an attractive job, and I was happy to get it. We decided we'd make it a class thing all the way through because there was nothing in those days except the movies and me.

"And so, I started off wearing tails at night, and afternoon dress with striped trousers in the afternoon. I played what I thought were real smart organ solos — classy stuff. Then, after about two months, I decided it was time to let something else happen, so I started community sings, using regular tunes and I wrote a lot of parodies which the audiences enjoyed.

"I was astounded after trying the simpler tunes like "Tea For Two", "At Sundown" etc., that the audience would sing songs like "On the Road to Mandalay." Even the ladies would sing what was considered a tune for a man with a deep bass voice.

"Some names have come to mind. One was Harry Blair, who ran the organists' slide service. Many persons have asked me where all the slides are which Harry had. My own, of which I had thousands at the New York Paramount, are gathering dust somewhere, I'm sure, on some junk pile.

"After a year at the Paramount, Mr. Whiteman came up with a great idea: the big-band policy. This was in 1936, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey had a band called "The Dorsey Brothers' Orchestra". You will remember the big names

such as Charlie Spivak, Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman and many more. All these became star attractions at the New York Paramount. The first band, as I recall was Glen Gray's Casa Loma Orchestra.

"The band, of course, was the big thing. With Tommy Dorsey was Frank Sinatra. In those days, Sinatra and Jo Stafford would sing two or three choruses each and the band did the rest of the one-hour or 75-minute show.

"At this time, I was approached by Columbia Records, and I made two albums for them on 78's, as well as a lot of community sing shorts for Columbia Pictures.

"Come 1948, both our daughters decided to get married, so I pulled up all the stakes, left the Paramount, sold our home in White Plains, N.Y., and my wife and I headed west. We landed in Reno, Nevada because I had a friend out there who said, 'Come on out and look the town over.' There was a beautiful lounge there and I took the job as organist for six months.

"From there, I went to the Hollywood Palladium. At that time, Freddie Martin and his Singing Saxophone were there as were Harry James and other big names. I next went to Las Vegas. The man who booked me into the Palladium had asked me if I would like to see Vegas. This was in 1949,

and I lived there until 1973.

"I fell in love with the desert. The sun shines 350 days a year, the drinking water is beautiful, and there is a rugged beauty about the desert.

"While at the *Last Frontier*, I went to Capitol Records to show them something I had made back in New York. Like all of us, I thought I could produce my own records. I had made some masters back in the Paramount Studio.

"Incidentally, Daniel Papp, now deceased, kept the Paramount studio organ, the big organ downstairs in the theatre, and all of the pianos in repair and in tune. I especially remember Dan because every now and then when I'd come in to play my organ solo, there'd be a note on the console saying: 'I'm releathering the clarinet' etc. He was always thoughtful enough to let me know ahead of time what to expect and what work he was doing on the organ.

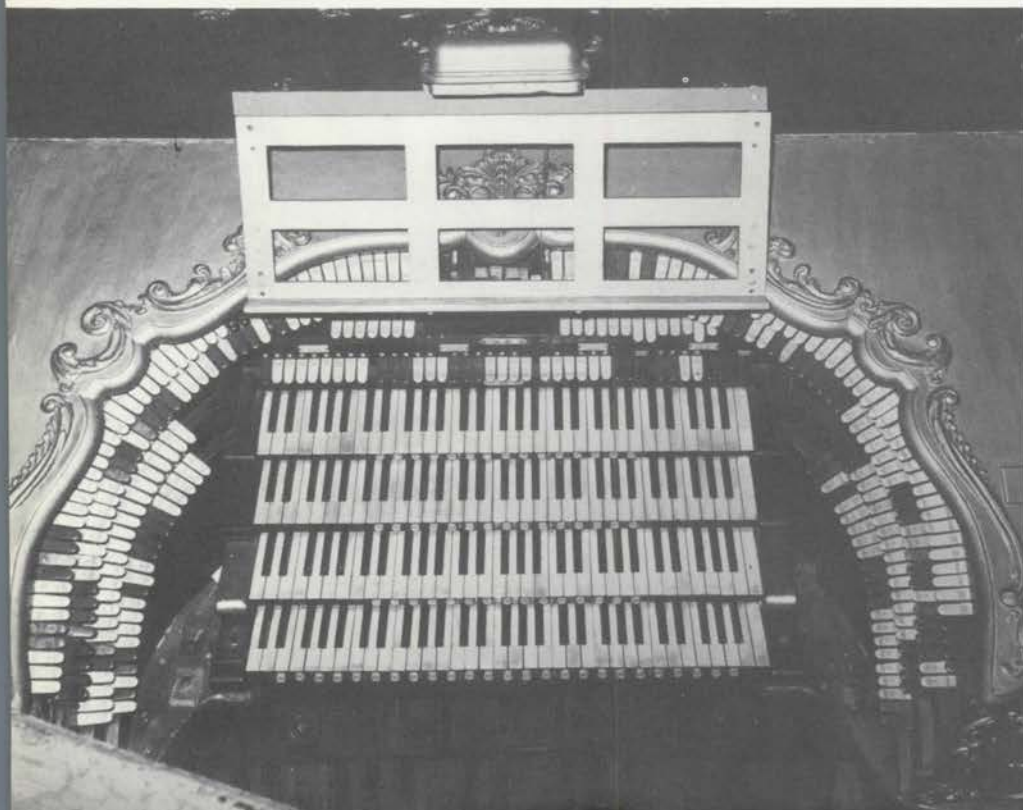
"But to get back to Las Vegas, I played the *Last Frontier* and I used the masters I had made in New York to get me started on Capitol Records. I made seven pipe organ records for them. The first one was in the home of Richard Vaughn, who had a 5-manual organ (ex-Paradise Theatre Wurlitzer from Chicago). I made six records in the Lorin Whitney studio and two albums with a trio which I had organized here in Las Vegas.

"After Las Vegas, I went to Harrah's in Reno and Lake Tahoe, a brand new departure for me, because in both places, I played from six in the morning until noon. In those days, Harrah's policy was to have entertainment 24 hours a day.

"From there, I went to Portland when I joined the Rodgers Co., and while playing at a small spot near Olympia, Wash. in 1963, I was approached by a representative of Conn. Walt Laeser, who was the district manager for that area, asked me if I would like to join the Conn Corporation. I've been with Conn ever since, and have been covering 70,000 miles a year, mostly by air and partially by rented cars. Once in a great, great while, I get a chance to ride a train, something I've always enjoyed.

"We moved back to Las Vegas when I joined Conn. In September 1964, the New York ATOS Chapter was kind enough to ask me to come back and play the last concert in the New York Paramount. That was the

The console of the 4/36 Wurlitzer in the New York Paramount where Don Baker presided for 14 years. Destroyed by fire in Wichita, it has been replaced and will control the organ in its new location in the Wichita Civic Auditorium. — (L. Klos collection)



last time the organ was played in its original home, and I was very happy to see Dan Papp there. The organ is now playing in Wichita. The Paramount, of course, is gone, having given way to offices; the shell which was the theatre has been filled in with floors.

"I do not plan to retire completely, ever. My desire now is to start some theatre-style cassette tapes. This will begin at the very bottom with the first lesson, and progress from there. I have always thought that the rudiments of music which I learned as a kid are still necessary. Too many of us, I'm sure, say 'I'd like to play "Lady of Spain" right away, quick!' But, it just doesn't work that way. We have to know the A-B-C's and the 1-2-3's of music.

"I have tried to set forth some of these ideas in a book of mine called *Theatre Organ Style*. The arrangements I have made, both in my theatre style book, and single arrangements, were not intended to be easy. They were intended to be a challenge to those who want to play better.

"Speaking of theatre organ style, you have asked me to comment on what T.O. style was when we played the silent movies. There were many sounds and many themes which we used, most of them to be found in music which you can still find today, or the Belwyn Library or Borodkin's Guide to Motion Picture Music, almost extinct books now. But here were some of the sounds:

"First and foremost, of course, was the love theme. I could be a simple tune, a current popular tune or something especially written for one particular movie. At the final fadeout, that final kiss, it could be enlarged upon and made bigger and broader to finish up the movie.

"When there was a scene of a villain's sneaking around, we played stealthy, sneaky music. I recall a tune called "The Frozen North" and it sounds just as the frozen North looks. Johann Strauss provided tunes of a 3/4 nature.

"Speaking of picture scores, the big Douglas Fairbanks Sr. movies always had their own scores, written out, note for note, and small scene by small scene. There would be many cues; instead of one every minute or so, a cue every 4 to 6 seconds. So, mood-wise, the movie was covered correctly all the time.

"I have mentioned Erno Rapee earlier. He was one of the finest movie

scorers I ever knew. Two more names come to mind who were excellent in those days: a man named Adolph Dumont, and a charming Russian named Plotnikoff.

"As for scoring, the right sounds, the right stops, like the right orchestration, are very much to be desired. For example, a tune such as a burglar theme doesn't sound too well if we use pretty sounds like those of flutes. But, if we use harsher, harder sounds, the reality becomes alive.

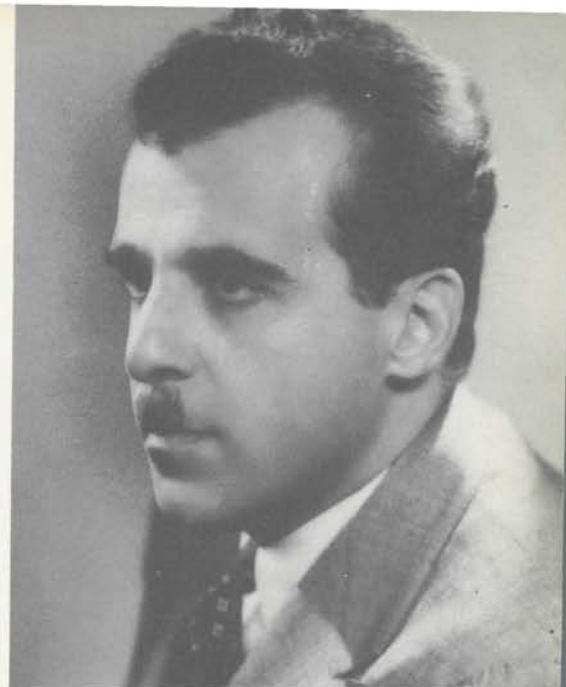
"Again pertaining to sounds, might I put in a word here about the electronic organ? We sometimes refer to them as 'plug-ins' and yet, think how much pleasure they have brought to people who do not have the room nor the means to have pipe organs in their homes. So, the sounds we have in an electronic organ, I believe we should all agree, are not too bad and are close to the original sound. Obviously, in a living room, they don't sound as big, because pipe organs were made to be played in theatres. But, we do have beautiful sounds and natural ones such as Flute, Piccolo, Kinura, Clarinet, snappy sounds like the Post Horn, cute little sounds like a Horn, and a very life-like sounds like chimes. On the electronic organ, we can have the much desired Tibia and Vox combinations to make theatre organ sounds. Surely the electronic sounds are satisfying and very, very definitely acceptable.

"Along with my job at Conn, I have made three albums on the Conn organ, and 8 or 9 times a year, I have the pleasure of playing some of the fine pipe organs which the ATOS has kept operative around the country. It is especially nice to enjoy organs such as those in Rochester, Detroit, Syracuse, N. Tonawanda, the San Diego Fox and the Los Angeles Wiltern organs.

"I am very grateful to the ATOS people for their many kindnesses to me. They also have been kind enough on occasion to let us present the Conn organ along with the pipe organ, and for that, Conn and I are grateful.

"One of the fine things which have happened to me since I've been with Conn, is the fact that I have been in all of the 50 states, some of them several times. Some benefits accrue out of living out of a suitcase. One of them is that one can do some sightseeing now and then.

"Going to and fro around the country and Canada, I believe one of my



Don Baker labels Erno Rapee as "one of the finest movie scorers I ever knew." His most famous compositions were "Charmaine" and "Diane". He served as conductor in the two largest theatres, the Roxy and Radio City Music Hall.

greatest pleasures has been the fact that upon occasion, I get the chance to teach a class. I have always enjoyed teaching, and if there is anything I have learned through these years of playing, which may be of value to anyone wanting to play the organ, I am most happy to pass it on.

"In my classes, I usually start off with a basic thought, and that is we must know the A-B-C's and the 1-2-3's of music. Scales, chords and exercises are considered by a lot of people to be a waste of time. But there is just no other way — you *have* to know the fundamentals!

"I consider the first fundamental on the organ, whether electronic or pipe, to be that piece of hardware on which most of us who play, put our right foot. It's called the swell pedal, or expression pedal or volume pedal, whichever you wish. It is not there to beat time. It's there for two reasons; it gives expression and it gives accents.

"I suppose the most fascinating thing about the organ are the stops themselves. If you listen to all the stops on an electronic or pipe organ in a hurry, they all seem to have, more or less, the same kind of sound. And they should, because on a pipe organ, sounds are made by blown air through pipes. On the electronic organ, they are made by different electronic components. So, if we listen to them in a hurry, we say 'I don't see much difference in the sound.'

"So we must investigate something which most of us don't want to take time to investigate. There are four kinds of sound. First and foremost is the Flute sound which goes down the scale real low or up very high. It is a pretty sound and velvety. It becomes even more velvety if you add a tremulant to it.

"The second sound is a harsh one — the strings. Many makers of organs use different names for certain sounds. It is well to know some of these names: Violin, Cello, Gamba, Salicional are used to identify strings.

"The third sound is the largest family in the organ, the reed family: Oboe (plaintive), Tuba (fat reed), Kinura (buzzing), Clarinet (medium), Saxophone, Trumpet (harsh), Post Horn (sharp, snarling) and Vox Humana.

"Fourth sound is the Diapason, the fundamental sound behind the solo voices.

"The stops are so wonderful and so useful, but like the swell pedal, we must use them correctly. All in all, when we're playing the organ, we have just about everything going for us. Certain fundamentals, of course, must be observed.

"Going back for a moment to 1925, I was a teacher and demonstrator at the Wurlitzer store on 42nd Street in New York. At that time, in a little auditorium downstairs, we had a Style E. I used to demonstrate and teach on this instrument, and very often in the middle of a lesson, one of the salesmen would come in and say, 'demonstration.' The student had to sit back and wait while we did our demonstration for the prospective customer.

"We had a completely lined out demonstration so that the salesman and his prospect could sit at the back of the auditorium and say, 'Now

you're going to hear the Flute, the Tibia, the big brass band, the drums, the xylophone' or whatever it might be. It was worked out ahead of time so that the salesman and I never spoke to each other nor did we get within 50 feet of each other during the whole demonstration. He concentrated strictly on talking with the prospect, while I concentrated on playing the demonstration as we had laid it out.

"We owe a great debt of thanks to Robert Hope-Jones who made fine individual sounds which combined to make an ensemble. Back in those days when I was at the Wurlitzer store, Wurlitzer made a small instrument which was a piano keyboard with 88 notes, plus 2 or 3 ranks of pipes and inevitably all the rhythm sounds necessary in even such a small organ as that. Of course, the organs got bigger and bigger, and better and better.

"Another of the thrills for me was joining ASCAP in 1947. I had written several tunes. "Bless You", which ran as a favorite for many weeks, was one of them.

"In July 1971, Mr. Stillman Rice, then president of ATOS, was kind enough to ask me to come to Seattle where I was installed as a member of the Theatre Organists' Hall of Fame, for which I am very, very grateful.

"Thank you for the chance to talk to you. I have sincerely enjoyed it. I hope to meet many of you in the coming weeks and months. Your many kindnesses to me have been most appreciated. Thank you very much."

To Don Baker, Hall of Fame Theatre Organist, all of us in the ATOS say, "Thank you, Don. Many of us will have the opportunity of seeing and hearing you when you appear throughout the United States and Canada. And thank you also for sharing your life's experiences with us in THEATRE ORGAN magazine." □



Manufacturers, distributors or individuals sponsoring or merchandising theatre pipe organ records are encouraged to send pressings to the Record Reviewer, Box 3564, Granada Hills, California 91344. Be sure to include purchasing information, if applicable, and if possible a black and white photo which need not be returned.

IT'S ALL WRIGHT, George Wright playing the 5/21 Wurlitzer in the Vaughn home, Inglewood, Calif. and the 4/36 Wurlitzer in the San Francisco Fox Theatre. No. DO 1215 (stereo). Available postpaid at \$5.50 from Doric Records, Box 605, Alamo, Calif. 94507.

Just at a time when George Wright isn't doing much on pipes and the schlock houses are about out of bargain-priced HI-FI label leftovers, Doric offers these welcome reprises of cuts on which George rode to fame. Doric has not duplicated the HI-FI pressings but has selected some of George's most popular and enchanting arrangements from several records for this release, which represents the George of 12 to 18 years ago, a period regarded by many as his most productive, from the theatre organ viewpoint. The tapes have been remastered by Doric prexy Frank Killinger for a brighter sound and are notably more pleasing to the ear (less distortion) than the HI-FI "Life" series of releases. Tunes played on the Fox organ are quickly identifiable by the increased "liveness" in case the vast difference in the over-all sound fails to register.

The wonders of those less-sophisticated days are present in these cuts.

LYN LARSEN

CONCERT TOURS

Personal Representative: HENRY W. HUNT, 415 S. Main St., Royal Oak, Mi 48067
Phone: (313) 547-3446