

THE END OF AN ERA AT THE ISTHMUS

by Jon Fisher

Panamanian organist Sr. Luis Alvarez sat down at the console of the Hotel El Panama's 3/27 Wurlitzer on Tuesday, January 22 at 9 P.M. as usual for six hours of prime theatre organ sounds. But this evening was different than other evenings at the El Bombarde lounge for when the blower was shut down at 3 a.m., it was for the last time. The next day the console cable was disconnected and the console was removed from the lounge. Later that same day, workmen painted the view windows black. Within a few weeks the organ was completely dismantled, crated, and put in storage. The fate of the organ is not known at this time.

After almost twelve years of continuous operation, one of Panama's great tourist attractions has ceased to exist. This of course is a great disappointment to the thousands of people who pass through Panama repeatedly in the pursuit of various business ventures. It is an even greater

disappointment to me, because during the year 1971-72, it was my privilege to be employed as the organist of the hotel. The Panamanians are warm and friendly people, and many of them went out of their way to make me feel welcome in a strange country. I won't go into the various details of the organ (specs and the like) since these have been covered by Doug Powers in an article in the October 1972 issue of THEATRE ORGAN. Doug was stationed in Panama and took a weeks leave to help us with the rebuilding of the combination action. We replaced the original pneumatic relay with direct electric relays, and moved the setter boards from the relay room to an area behind the console. This made life easier on the organist since he could change his combinations on his break time right at the console.

All of us have played Wurlitzers that have dead notes, faulty stop tabs, and all the rest of the various ills that

befell a theatre organ. Bernie Kirkwood, the technician that maintained this instrument, and worked on the original installation, made sure that none of these ills befell this particular Wurlitzer. Many ATOS members and other theatre organ buffs were thrilled to be able to sit down and play this organ without worrying whether or not an individual note or stop was going to work. We had a policy where anyone that wanted to try the organ could do so in the morning before the lounge opened, as long as Bernie or I was there.

During my stay, Bernie let me get involved in the maintenance of the organ, and I learned more about the care and feeding of a Wurlitzer in that one year than in the previous ten. This was a commercial installation, and Mondays were the only nights the organ was not in use. Any extensive repair work had to be accomplished between Monday morning and Tues-



The three chambers and the expression grilles as viewed from the console platform.

day night. The time we replaced the bolster cables and spacers all the work was completed in two days. This meant rewiring the bolsters to the spreaders, replacing the spacers, adjusting the bolster tension, and adjusting all the stop tab springs. We worked fast! When we tuned the organ, all 27 ranks were done in three afternoons!

Because the installation was geared for the Latin clientele several items were added to the organ, and some effects were not original. For instance, the oogah horn was from Sears — \$16.95 (no tax). The fire gong was replaced with a bell from one of the electric mules that pull the ships through the locks of the canal. All of the original toy counter items were retained, but two more tamborines were added, and a second marimba and xylophone were installed, as well as another ride cymbal.

Have you ever wanted a string bass for your Wurlitzer? Well, you take the spare 8' Tibia offset that has cluttered your cellar for years, add a tab to your pedal division, and wire it in through the pedal pizzicato relay, and Presto! String bass! In the Panama installation, the additional Tibia was located in the percussion chamber so that the volume could be independently controlled. Before my stay, the unit had been removed because of rearrangements in the percussion chamber. Some purists



The Console — a four manual shell, but only three manuals were ever installed.

objected to the departures from the original specs, but all I'd have to do was put on a Tibia, Vox, String, and Krumet registration with a little English Horn thrown in for emphasis, and they'd somehow forget about the Sears oogah horn.

With over two hundred and fifty stop tabs and twenty-seven ranks to

work with, along with beautiful unification, this Wurlitzer was a joy to play. One tends to take things for granted when one is exposed to the same thing day after day, but because of the constantly changing clientele, this job always provided variety. One night an Australian ship stopped in Balboa, and I swear the entire boatload crowded into that lounge. The bar was designed to seat around 250 people, but that night there must have been over 500. People were even sitting with me on the bench — and that's crowded! When I broke into "Waltzing Matilda," the place erupted with over 500 voices at the top of their lungs, and even 27 ranks couldn't compete with that!

This is a personal recollection of some of the good times and people that pivoted around the El Bombarde lounge. It was not my intention to give you a history of the organ — Doug Powers has done a superb job of that. It's a tragedy that this Wurlitzer speaks no more, but for almost twelve years, thousands of people, many of whom had never heard a theatre organ before, thrilled to the sound of this unique instrument. To those of us who were lucky enough to hear and play it; we have our memories. To paraphrase Doug Powers, 'There was a Wurlitzer alive and well and living in Panama.' □

The Solo Chamber — the 16' English Horn is at the extreme right.

