

WEST COAST ORGANFEST CLICKS

by Hal Steiner

It was the best year yet for the Home Organ Festival. The annual event, held at a California state park (Asilomar) near Monterey attracted 1600 attendees, the most ever. They had access to 33 concerts, 8 workshops and 8 master classes during the 5-day session, not to mention various side events, such as 10 "on the house" champagne parties, a costume ball and a half a dozen nightly jam sessions. Thirty-five organists, many of them "name artists," performed on 12 brands of electronic instrument, sponsored by 15 exhibitors who brought in an estimated \$350,000 worth of organ equipment. Enthusiasm ran high among all concerned. The attendees gathered from 18 states and Canada (plus one Australian), the bulk coming from the Bay Area.

The exhibitor/talent lineup looked something like this:

Allen: Dwight Beacham, George Knadler, Bob Franklin, Tom Hazleton.

Baldwin: Ken Clark, Frank Stitt, Wayne Wilkinson, Eddie Osborn.

Conn: Richard Purvis, Bud Iverson, Carol Jones, Larry Ferrari, Eddie Vodicka, Dale Zeiger. Don Saucerier: synthesizer.

Concert Co: Donn Clayton

Gulbransen: Tommy Stark, Bill Langford.

Hammond: Don Lee Ellis, Don Lewis.

Lowrey: Barron Smith, Johnny Kemm.

Rodgers: Bill Thomson, Maria Kumagai, Jonas Nordwall.

Saville: Frank Cimmino, Tom Cotner.

Thomas: Byron Melcher, Bob Ralston, Dan Bellomy.



Lincolnesque Larry Wickersham conducts a class in the chapel at 9:30 A.M.

(Nakaharapic)

A full house at Festival Concert Time.

(Nakaharapic)





Bob Dove. His 'September in the Rain' was pure sunshine. (Nakaharapic)



Frank Cimmino. A long way from the New Jersey Suburban restaurant to the Festival in California. (Stufoto)

Tom Cotner presents Ann Leaf with the award for naming Saville's new entertainment theatre organ the "Renaissance." (Nakaharapic)



Wurlitzer: Gus Pearson, Ray Hanson.

Yamaha: Bob Dove, Dennis Hinman, Danny Brown, O'lyn Callahan.

About half of the organists listed were veterans of at least one previous Festival. The others were newcomers.

The Festival provides two showcases to merchandisers of electronic organs — concerts in acoustically good 1100-seat Merrill Hall and exhibit space in acoustically separated cottages on the grounds. Both pay off for exhibitors. A partial canvas of showrooms on closing day indicated that a good many organs had been sold during the week. Emphasis is on "institutional" advertising (good will) rather than immediate sales although one exhibitor claimed 10 major sales. The hoped-for effect of the 15th annual Festival is to up Holiday sales, as it has in the past.

Products shown were mainly refinements of previous models, with a minimum of surprises. Most manufacturers still seem to be carrying on last year's romance with what are loosely termed "synthesizers," mostly lineal descendants of the almost forgotten Hammond "Solovox" of the late '30s. For some reason these extra voices started out as attachments in their current reincarnation, played from an extra keyboard like the Solovox. Now there still may be an additional short manual involved, but the trend seems to be to incorporate the synthesizer into the organ circuitry and furniture.

The Festival promoters keep a close watch on audience reactions to the various innovations (aided by questionnaires) and have noted falling enthusiasm for concert time accorded instruments which are not organs — the soloing synthesizers. Therefore, Festival rules were changed and the '74 schedule allowed no concert time to non-organs, although the attachments were on display in showrooms. Despite the rule, a couple of exhibitors managed to get their separate synthesizers on the concert stage but the audience reaction was such that it's improbable they'll try it again. Festivaleers just seem to prefer complete organs. They don't mind the added voices if they're part of the organ.

There were exceptions to the synthesizer trend; Rodgers continues to improve the theatrical qualities of the voices on its horseshoe stoprails and the Conn 651 never sounded



Bill Thomson. Back from 'Down Under' with his Koala bear just in time for the Festival. (Stufoto)

Dwight Beacham did his stuff in the Allen showroom. (Stufoto)



To hear Roy Hanson's pedal technique on the Wurlitzer, one would never guess his legs were paralyzed by an accident only a few months before. (Stufoto)

Dan Bellomy (Stufoto)





The 'style 235' Saville, now the 'Renaissance.' Almost an exact copy.

better. These firms are still on the trail of the magic and engineering required to coax pipe tones from transistors, which is, after all, the real objective. Now Rodgers and Conn have been joined in this worthy quest by a late bloomer — Saville.

This firm, long a builder of custom church electronics, has thrown its hat into the entertainment organ field with a 3-manual entertainment model which reveals considerable progress in attaining instrumental voices from transistors in a relatively short period of time. His strings and reeds are very fine, with more work to be done to get the Tibia chirping with a more effective tremulant. The console is an eye catcher; it is a close copy of the Wurlitzer style 235 theatre pipe organ console. Designer Tom Cotner, making no extravagant claims, says "baby" aims toward being the electronic equivalent of a nine rank pipe organ (the 235 is an 11-ranker). Saville has already sold the prototype. Incidentally, a contest was held to name

"baby". Festival visitor Ann Leaf won the \$50.00 prize with "Renaissance."

For years it has been said that when Yamaha discovers the theatre pipe organ, things will begin to happen. While the firm's consoles remain largely unchanged, there is evidence

that Yamaha engineers have finally discovered pipe sounds. The model EX-42 is the sole evidence, so far, but it's easily the most theatrical sounding instrument the Japanese firm has exhibited. Part of its excellence as heard during the Festival may be due to organist Bob Dove's sensitive playing of a Buddy Cole arrangement of *September in the Rain*.

New models of the makes most used by professionals are more cluttered with gadgetry than ever. Where the time-tested stopkey once dominated the stoprail to control all aspects of registration, there are now sliders, dials, push buttons, tilting tablets, and rollers on both stoprail and side jamb to add confusion to a function that should be simple and standardized, although the addition of



Danny Brown "knocked 'em dead" with his humor in the best stand-up comedian style. He did a nice job at the Yamaha, too. (Stufoto)

Don Lewis. Gospel music with humor.

(Nakaharapic)





Larry Ferrari. 'Somewhere My Love' with body english.

(Nakaharapic)



Batman' Tommy Stark lights at the Gulbransen.

(Nakaharapic)

Moving the Big One. 'Just like moving a pipe organ console' beams Peter Polito (foreground) as the Festival's 'Amalgamated Organ Movers' prepare to hoist the Saville 'Renaissance' console to the stage.

(Nakaharapic)



synthesizers tends to complicate the function. One manufacturer has regressed to the point of adding Hammond-style drawbars to control voices in place of stopkeys, while Hammond is using more and more stopkeys. As one pro put it, "You gotta have a diploma in how to get around on these new models."

The Festival weather this year was sunless and somewhat drab. Rain often threatened the Monterey Peninsula, but never materialized. The denizens of the forest surrounding the park buildings turned out, as always, to startle festivaleers at night. Deer were the most common non-humans, with raccoons a close second.

Generally concert performances were high in quality, with the experienced pro's making the solidest impact. Sometimes they resorted to visual gags. For example Bob Ralston displayed his pet Boa Constrictor wrapped around his neck while playing a tune. Seven foot "Paganini's" behavior was exemplary; it was obvious he had a crush on Bob. However, Jonas Nordwall's mechanical monkey was reluctant to clang his windup cymbals for the audience. He had to be coaxed.

Most of the newcomers gave creditable performances, too, and will do even better when they've played at enough Festivals to learn what Festival audiences expect and appreciate most. To their credit there was very little of the flashy, body English, fanny tossing, manual whapping, palm glissing Ethel Smith-type stylings which sometimes marred earlier Festivals. Most artists realized there was no need to make playing look difficult for the benefit of today's festivaleers.

One thing that was lacking this year was humor — at least in the generous doses administered last year. However, Bud Iverson and Dick Purvis teamed up for a comedy routine with Bud voicing Dick's thoughts as the latter struggled through a purposely faulty *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor*, a sketch rich in humor. The only other humor came as a surprise when Yamaha's Danny Brown turned out to be a standup comedian as well as a key pusher.

Despite an increasing number of spinoffs, this year's Home Organ Festival — the original — easily lived up to its boast — "The greatest organ show on earth!" Electronic division, of course. □