

# IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE . . . Revisted

by Bob Hill and Stu Green  
Photos by Bob Hill

In a recent issue of THEATRE ORGAN we ran a VOX POP which extolled the virtues of a Long Beach, Calif. theatre organ aficionado and motorcycle merchandiser named Joe Koons and closed with the statement that Joe was having fun in the hobby, which was true at the time the item was written. But by the time the item hit print Joe had suffered a brutal stroke which sentenced him to the hospital for a savings-withering sojourn. Joe, not being one to place his fate in the hands of insurance companies, fell back on the savings he had accumulated to absorb any family misfortunes; he had provided for wife Ida Mae and the five progeny. Yet, Joe couldn't know beforehand about the astronomical medical costs his illness would total.

As the days wore on, Joe's hospitalization and doctor bills soared. Soon, Joe's savings had been gobbled up by the burgeoning expenses.

"We were starting to really worry," admits wife Ida Mae — who Joe, for reasons known only to himself, has called "Spud" since their earliest courtship days. There's a parallel here with the old Jimmie Stewart movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, in which the townspeople who have grown to love Jimmie for the many services and favors he's done through the years, bail his bank out of a financial crisis by digging

savings out of socks and tin cans buried in backyards and delivering the pile of money in a bushel basket. In the movie, Jimmie was aided and abetted by a down-to-earth angel named Clarence, who was trying to earn his wings.

In our real life version of *It's a Wonderful Life* the part of Clarence is

Del Castillo put the program together and included himself on the artists' list, happily (Del is shown at Joe's bike shop console).



played by a number of LA Chapter members, but the instigator has got to be Chapter Vice Chairman Malin Dollinger because, as Joe Koons' family doctor, he had inside information (Dollinger has since been kicked upstairs to Chapter Chairman). Malin alerted others to the monetary crunch encircling the hospitalized Joe. All had enjoyed Joe's continued hospitality at his organ-equipped motorcycle shop over the years and soon a movement had formed. The story was told very well by Bob Hill in the LA Professional Organists' monthly OFF THE KEYBOARDS. With the permission of Editor Del Castillo (*Dinny Timmins to Elevator Shaft* fans), here is Bob Hill's story.

Joe Koons, the eminent Long Beach, Calif. Motorcycle magnate has friends, and they stretch from coast to coast. He didn't have to get sick to prove it. But that he did, and his medical bills were beginning to sound like a governmental appropriation.

We don't know what was wrong with Joe, but we are certain of one thing. It wasn't his heart. Because for almost six years Joe has held open house every Saturday night for all who cared to partake of his generosity. And that generosity included a magnificent Wurlitzer-Welte-Morton-Kimball, etc. theatre pipe organ of majestic proportions. And the only strings were



AAF Captain Jack Moelmann

those singing in the chambers. Incredible as it sounds, it was all for free — a weekly party where anyone was invited to have a go at the console, or just sit back and listen to those with the courage to try their hands at the monster.

Now when a guy like that gets real sick, you've just got to do something. So a bunch of his friends, who have enjoyed his hospitality, decided to hold a benefit concert to help pay some of his hospital and medical bills. And, without any formal organization whatsoever, although many of them looked a lot like local leaders in the Los Angeles Chapter of the American Theatre Organ Society, a theatre organ concert the likes of which you have never seen before was held at the Elks Building on Sunday afternoon, Nov. 3, 1974. A capacity audience of some 800 fans filled every available seat and made the whole affair a heart warming success.

Just to give you an idea of what we mean, the first artist introduced by the irrepressible Bill Worrall was the real Dean of Los Angeles Theatre Organists, Gaylord Carter himself, aided and abetted by youthful organist Gerald Nagano. Gaylord led us through some lightning-like arrangements from his album entitled *Fifty Years of Chasing*. We could almost see the hero heading them off at the pass.

Then it was time for ATOS Program Chairman Lloyd del Castillo, the master of the march. With an impish wit showing through a facade of suave dignity, Del amused the masses with his humor as well as his superb musical ability. And he is famous for both.

Next at bat was the sweetheart of Chavez Ravine, sparkling southpaw Helen Dell, with some outstanding renditions she could never do between pitches at the O'Malley Manse.

Then dashing Don Lee Ellis, from *DimiTri's* in Anaheim, who proved he can handle pipes as well as transistors.

But none assumed more decisive command of the Mighty Morton than the tall, stately lady with the bun hair-do, Miss Ramona Gerhard. From the Eddie Dunstedter Theme, *Open Your Eyes*, to her closer, *Ramona*, and her touching tribute to Joe Koons, she held the packed house in the palm of her hand.

Miss Maria Kumagai, well-known to most of the group for her superb musical ability, proceeded with her magnificent orchestral arrangement of



Candi Carley



Bill Worrall (holding a copy of his favorite magazine) established the happy mood for the show with his upbeat MCing.

A happy Joe Koons poses with Romona Gerhard.



Lyle Knight

Veteran organist Gaylord Carter and youthful Gerald Nagano both did their musical bits.





The mystery of the East is embodied in this quizzical look from Maria Kumagai.

*Deep Purple*, followed by the stirring music of *Carmen*.

Another regular from Joe's was the scholarly Lyle Knight, a Long Beach teacher and concert artist, who formerly played the big Barton at Chicago Stadium. Lyle showed his artistry with selections from *Oklahoma* and *The Desert Song*. For an impressive closer, he chose one of Joe's favorites — *How Great Thou Art*.

Next were youthful artists Gerald Nagano and Candi Carley. Showing bravery beyond belief Gerald opened with the finger bustin' *Roller Coaster*, as recorded years ago by George Wright and a challenge for the best in the business. And blond, vivacious, Candi led the mighty Morton through a boogie beat that rocked the hall.

Resplendent in Air Force Blue came the closer, AAF Capt. Jack Moelmann, another regular artist at the motorcycle emporium. Having just arrived at Ontario International Airport from Madrid, with barely enough time to get his breath, Jack opened with the *United States Air Force Anthem*, natch. With absolutely no recent practice on the organ, he led us on an imaginary musical journey symbolic of his recently completed European tour of duty.

Although we are aware of the danger of omission in recognizing contributions of individuals, we just can't neglect the efforts of Program Director, Del Castillo who booked all the artists, Dr. Malin Dollinger and Chapt. Chairman Ray Bonner, who handled the tickets, money and a hundred other details; Dick Stoney and his organ

crew who had the instrument tuned to perfection, and to all the artists who willingly contributed their talents to aid in Joe's recovery.

That's Bob Hill's account of the concert. In addition to the 800 who attended, others sent in donations "in absentia." And what about Joe?

The concert was sprung on him as a surprise. On arriving, he reached for his wallet, expecting to buy tickets for his little group, and was somewhat puzzled when he was waved through. Of course, "Spud" was in on the ruse from the beginning. Part way through the performance, the truth dawned on Joe and he was exuberant. He was heard to exclaim, "Have I ever got friends!" Joe had not fully recovered at the time of the concert. The stroke had slightly affected his memory and he had some difficulty matching names with faces, a rough condition to face for an outgoing man who loves crowds and whose friends run into the hundreds. But the memory lapse has decreased since the concert.

We asked Joe's youngest daughter, Barbara (a talented organist of the Bach-Palestrina school) whether the Saturday night Jam Sessions would be curtailed in deference to Joe's health.

"No way" said Barbara. "Dr. Dollinger hasn't yet allowed daddy to return to work — but the Saturday sessions are definitely in." They are Joe's very special therapy.

And so it came to pass that Joe invited all whose names appeared on



Helen Dell

the benefit concert donors' list to a Christmas Party at his motorbike emporium and organ aerie in Long Beach. They came in droves to partake of generous gobs of organ music garnished with an excellent buffet supper.

Presiding in the one reserved seat was a radiant Joe, enjoying his many friends and organ music supplied by many of the same artists who had taken part in his benefit concert. He was particularly heartened by the benefit concert tally; his debt had been lightened by more than \$4000.00. Things are humming once again at Joe Koons' cycle shop. Thanks, Clarence! □

Back at the cycle shop, Joe, daughter Barbara and wife "Spud" get set for the Christmas party they threw for all the friends Joe learned he had via the benefit concert.

