

Betty Gould

Princess of the Console

by Ron Rhode and Karl Warner

Betty Gould sits in a Phoenix restaurant, eyes twinkling as she thinks back over her career, and muses, "I guess a rolling stone keeps rolling." This aptly condenses the memories of a theatre organist whose accomplishments are nearly legendary.

Born in Michigan, she began playing piano as soon as she could reach the keys. She was finally given two years of lessons, but nearly drove her teacher to distraction at the ease with which she played. At age eleven Betty began accompanying vaudeville acts in Midland, Michigan. The manuscripts, marked with years of notations, were too difficult to follow, but she managed to pick up the tunes and tempos from the performers.

At thirteen she visited her sister in Detroit. They attended the Broadway-Strand Theatre, hearing Eddie Benedict play the Hope-Jones organ. Betty was stunned by the sound and effects. Two years later she extended her summer vacation in Detroit to a more permanent basis, living with her sister, demonstrating sheet music and playing silent movies on the piano.

After a year, Betty joined a touring group as pianist, "well-chaperoned" at the insistence of her family. With trumpet, violin, drums, xylophone, and a soprano, they toured the Southeastern and Midwestern states for six months playing auditoriums, gymnasiums, and lodges.

Returning to Detroit, Betty played piano for silents and vaudeville. She

Betty was surprised to see this photo of herself, enlarged to larger-than-life, in the Center Theatre lobby, New York.



was excited to receive an offer to play in Honolulu, but her parents quickly vetoed the idea. Betty, however, was on her way, and accepted a position playing a Bartola in Ohio. An installation man told her of a Barton job in Minneapolis-St. Paul, and away she went.

In the twin cities she obtained her first real "theatre organ" job at the Oxford Theatre (3/8 Barton) for \$35 a week. After three or four weeks she was thundering through a picture when Dan Barton towered over her, "You sure can play a picture, but what you don't know about an organ! You be here at nine tomorrow morning." It was a shattering experience, but Barton patiently worked with her on the orchestral properties of a theatre organ until she had mastered the technique. She gradually worked up to \$65 a week at the Oxford and also played relief for Maurice Cook at the Tower (3/8 Barton) for about three months. When the St. Clair Theatre opened with a Robert Morton she was lured over at \$75. Becoming homesick, Betty broke her contract with the St. Clair by agreeing not to play Minneapolis-St. Paul again. She never did.

She returned to Detroit in the early summer only to find that yearly con-

tracts were not issued until September 1. Travelling to Huntington, West Virginia, she played a 2-manual Wurlitzer. After hearing her play only one night the management offered to put \$1000 in escrow as good faith toward a year's contract. Betty refused, stayed three months, and returned to Detroit.

She landed a year's contract to play the same Broadway-Strand (3/15 Hope-Jones) she had first heard as a girl. As word of her talent spread, she often found the first two rows occupied by other organists.

But Chicago was calling now. Mr. Kaufman, general manager of L and B, sent her first to a neighborhood house, the Lakeside Theatre (2/7 Wurlitzer). Passing an alley one night, walking home after the last show, she heard five shots, saw the flashes, and heard the roar of a motor. Huddling against a cafeteria wall in terror, the incident made real to her the gangland mood of prohibition Chicago.

Next was a post as assistant organist for a year at the New Harding Theatre (3/15 Wurlitzer) where she played movies, recitals, and intermissions. The ORCHESTRA REVIEW of March 1926 says "... she comes as close to being a genius as is possible in her special art." An unfortunate incident

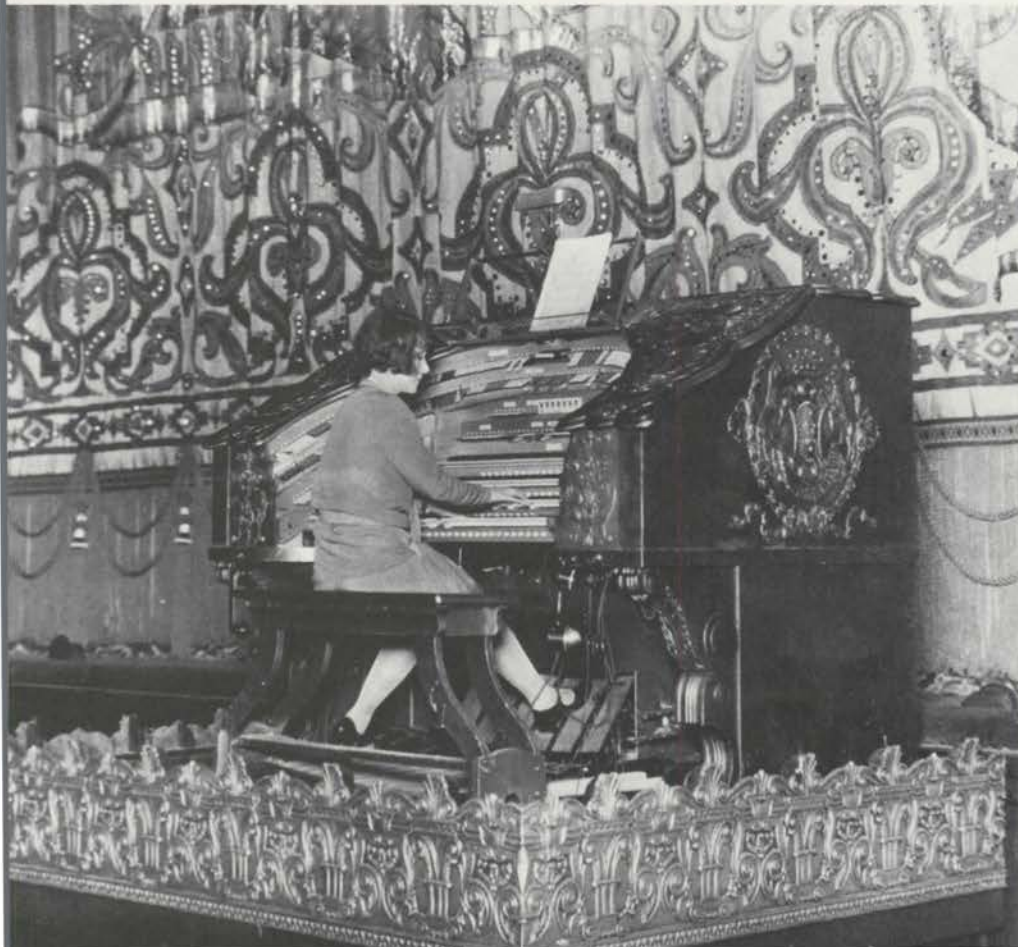
caused her to leave the New Harding. The manager, noting a lapse while the performers took their bows, told Betty to pick up the last song of the stage show with full organ until the newsreel. However, this change was not relayed to the orchestra, and the leader stormed down to the organ to tell Betty his sentiments in obscene and profane language. She picked up a chair to hit him, but was prevented from doing so by a band member. She immediately called a substitute and walked off the job. The next week she was called to the musician's union to confront Jimmy Petrillo and the orchestra leader. Petrillo told her that if she gave the word he would remove the orchestra leader's union card. She refused to do so, but did not return to the New Harding. Puzzled over how Petrillo had learned of the incident, she later remembered that his brother, Caesar Petrillo, was a member of the orchestra and had undoubtedly reported it.

She was doing opening recital and first morning picture at the Oriental Theatre (4/20 Wurlitzer) when one of the local newspapers noted, "The Oriental Theatre is the Isis and Osiris of Jazz, the Alpha and Omega of Syncopation, the Temple of Tempting Tunes, so Betty fits into the scheme as neatly as one could wish." She was also designated as "All Chicago Organist" at the International Jazz Congress.

Louie Lipstone, musical director of Balaban and Katz, later of Paramount Pictures, set Betty up as relief organist for four theatres daily. She played about 20 minutes at each while the regular organists ate supper. Since all were downtown theatres, she walked between the McVickers (3/11 Wurlitzer), the Roosevelt (Kimball), the Oriental and the Chicago (4/29 Wurlitzer). Henry Murtaugh was then at the Chicago, which Betty remembers as a difficult organ for the organist. "It sounded beautiful in the house, but not to the organist." She was also relief at times for the Tivoli (3/15 Wurlitzer), Uptown (4/28 Wurlitzer), and Norshore (4/15 Wurlitzer). When asked how she adapted to playing many different organs each day she replies, "I don't know. It was just a job and I did it."

More prestigious jobs were to come shortly. She quit Balaban and Katz and moved with her identical twin daughters to New York, where her husband had accepted a job. She audi-

Called from beneath a hair dryer, Betty was whisked off to the main console at the Fox Theatre, St. Louis, for publicity photos. Hey, Betty, could that be called the wet look?



tioned for Max Silver of Fox, and was assigned to the Fox 14th Street Theatre (3/15 Wurlitzer) playing pictures and vaudeville. Major Zampthe, manager of Fox Theatres, heard of her work and asked her to assist in opening the Fox Theatre in St. Louis. She was hesitant about leaving her family, but Major Zampthe promised if she would go for two weeks she could have the theatre of her choice when she returned to New York.

So early 1929 found her playing morning recitals on the St. Louis Fox (4/36 Wurlitzer) and throughout the day on the lobby (3/13 Moller). Upon returning to New York she was surprised to find herself again assigned to the Fox 14th Street. Remembering Major Zampthe's promise, she marched into his office to confront him. Pulling herself up to her full 5' 2", she reminded him of his obligation. Although reluctant to admit that he had made such a promise, he finally honored it. Betty chose the Brooklyn Fox (4/37 Wurlitzer) and played until summer vacation. When she returned she found a new organist, Rosa Rio, at the Brooklyn. Betty decided to attend a show and listen. She liked Rosa's style so much she did not attempt to regain her position.

In the Fall of 1930 she was hired to play the opening of the Stapleton Paramount twin-console organ (3/3/19 Wurlitzer) on Staten Island. Her partner was Priscilla Holbrook, who was given the name Jean, and they were billed simply as Betty and Jean. Despite Jesse Crawford's warning to Betty about the difficulties in twin-console work, Betty and Jean were highly successful in doing theme routines with vocals and patter. They sometimes created their own song slides, dressed in appropriate costumes, and even coordinated the music with motion pictures of themselves on the screen. During this engagement Betty is credited with saving a fan's life. As the stage lift was descending a woman's diaphanous chiffon scarf caught in the exposed worm gear, choking her as it wound. Jean, who controlled the lift, couldn't hear Betty yelling to stop. Finally, in desperation, Betty ran across the descending stage to Jean and the lift was stopped. She left the Stapleton in June of 1931 due to illness.

The depression hit New York musicians hard and Betty played "catch-as-catch-can." One job she remembers

was at the Beacon Theatre (4/19 Wurlitzer) where the marquee read, "Betty Gould at the Mighty Wurlitzer — George Arliss — The Man Who Played God." Being billed above Arliss really meant she had arrived. Having never been afraid of a lift until this job, she felt terror when she tried to stop the unusually high lift in the normal position. On her last night, unknown to Betty, the theatre manager was fulfilling his own wishes, overriding her lift control from the master panel and sending her ever upward to the top in spite of her fear.

In late 1932 Betty was hired by S.L. "Roxy" Rothafel to open the RKO Roxy Theatre (the name was soon changed to Center Theatre) in the Rockefeller Radio City Complex. Betty remembers that Roxy and Musical

Director Erno Rapee were present that day. Rapee was reluctant to see her hired, as organists Dick Leibert, Alex Richardson, and Desidir D'Antalfy were already engaged, and he was trying desperately to keep Roxy's spending under control. Furthermore, Rapee did not want to hire a woman, and boasted that of all musicians at both Radio City theatres, the only woman was the harpist in the Music Hall orchestra. Roxy was insistent that another organist was necessary if two theatres were to be staffed, and he wanted Betty for the job. After Roxy sharply told Rapee twice to put her on the payroll, she was hired and assigned to the RKO Roxy (4/34 Wurlitzer) with Alex Richardson. Opening night was December 29, 1932, and Richardson was lulling the audience with some

Priscilla Holbrook (Jean) and Betty, at the master console, are real show stoppers, providing traffic control for their audiences at the Stapleton Paramount, Staten Island, New York.





Radio's Princess of the Console mixes fan mail and cheesecake at the WMCA studio Wurlitzer, New York.

Betty's back, and brushing up her pyrotechnics at the Organ Stop Wurlitzer, Phoenix.



heavy organ. As he finished his spot, Betty raced to the console in an against-the-regulation red dress, cut low in the back, hit the pistons, and launched into an up-tempo *Fit As a Fiddle*, bringing the audience to life. C.A.J. Parmentier later replaced Richardson, and Parmentier and Betty completed the run until the theatre was suddenly closed after about six months in order to boost attendance at the Music Hall.

When the Center reopened for another stint, Betty was again at the console. At about the same time she began broadcasting from the theatre on NBC. Financial troubles dictated a second closure of the theatre, but Betty stayed with NBC a few months, broadcasting from the studio Skinner. As theatres decreased organ use, radio increased it.

She played a short while at RKO 58th Street Theatre (3/10 Wurlitzer) where the LONG ISLAND DAILY STAR in the summer of 1933 dubbed her "... a veritable streak at the keys." She also was doing radio commercials and short spots. In 1934 she started general organ work on the studio console (2/7 Wurlitzer) at WMCA, New York's first independent station. She soon had her own popular morning show, "Sing Something Simple," which ran for a year. After running a title contest among the listeners, Betty was christened "Radio's Princess of the Console." While staying on at WMCA she also took over the "Morning Reveries" show from Fred Fiebel at Columbia, playing from the Paramount Studio organ (4/21 Wurlitzer). When Fiebel returned to the show she left Columbia, but continued another two years at WMCA.

Keeping up with the changing musical world brought new challenges for Betty. In the late 1930's she demonstrated in the Hammond department of the Knabe Company, but in February of 1940 was called back to the Center Theatre for the third time to play the run of Walt Disney's "Pinocchio." Christmas of that year found her playing Hammond in the lobby of the Chrysler Building. Soon hotel jobs gained popularity as the country entered the war years. After a stint doing spot commercials for an agency, she accepted hotel jobs on the Hammond in the Spring of 1942 in Torrington and Hartford, Connecticut. She settled into the Heublein in Hart-

ford, and in July 1943 a local columnist said "... she amazes and intrigues you with her pyrotechnics on that organ."

As she refined her style and technique on Hammond, she returned to New York to play the St. Regis Hotel in 1947, and held a highly successful and rewarding job at the Shelbourne Hotel on the boardwalk in Atlantic City during the seasons of 1946 and 1948. In February of 1949 she became ill, and in November moved West for her health.

Her first stop was Tucson, where she played the Westerner Hotel and the NCO Club at a local Air Force Base. Then on to an eight-month engagement at the Fez Club in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where she was the "band" for dancing. While in Albuquerque she met Bill Brown (now a resident of Phoenix and owner of a 4/28 Wurlitzer at the Organ Stop Pizza and a 5/21 Wurlitzer in his home) who remains an ardent fan of Betty's.

As she explored the West she played an engagement at Valle's in San Diego, then tried Los Angeles and Santa Barbara.

But when she sauntered into an ATOS meeting at the Phoenix Paramount (Meisel & Sullivan - 3/13 Wurlitzer) in 1966 she was immediately encouraged to try her hand at the pipes. Through the local Phoenix group she acquired Dan Barton's address and began a correspondence which continued until his recent death. Never willing to retire, she has a Hammond in her home, keeps up with new plug-in organs, and plays a variety of jobs. She has played Bill Brown's home organ and proven she is still a "veritable streak at the keys."

"I guess a rolling stone keeps rolling." □

Editors note to the Fats Waller fans: Although we mentioned in the last issue that we would print the Waller Discography (as issued in England) in this issue, we were unable to do so. However, we do still plan on printing it in a future issue.

Now, if our Fats Waller fans make an issue of our neglect in printing the discography in this issue, because we had promised in the last issue to run it in this issue, then we will consider it a hot issue and run it in the next issue instead of just waiting for some future issue.

If you can only find it . . .

History Is Recorded Somewhere

by Harvey Whitney

Tom and Louella Sanders, Sierra Chapter ATOS members in Oroville read Carroll Harris' story on the Golden Bear Playhouse in THEATRE ORGAN (page 11 December 1974) and noted history was lacking on the 2/7 Wurlitzer prior to 1968. Well, bless my tambourine if Louella didn't have the fill-in for this period.

Let's start way back in the twenties in Fresno. Lorin and the writer constituted the Whitney gang and down the street were the Critchfields - Howard, Irene, Walt, Jim, Cal, Josina and Ruth - a bit outnumbered as I recall. Only one thing I remember - we were all fascinated by the pipe organ in the Civic Auditorium at Fresno and Van Ness.

It's all becoming clear now. That's why Lorin took lessons on a local 2/6 Morton and later became the owner of a 4/34 Morton. And me, I really pulled wishbones until I had a 2/6 Morton at home with my own staff organist, Virginia, to play the old tunes of the twenties. Then there was Cal Critchfield who grew up still thinking about the Fresno pipe organ. After schooling, and marrying a sweet girl named Jane, he moved to Richmond where he and his brother Jim (Louella's father) built their real estate and insurance emporium. Jane liked pipe organs too and by the end of the thirties, she was looking for a pipe organ challenge. That challenge was to be met right in Cal and Jane's church.

The year was 1941 - when you couldn't buy a straight organ. St. Lukes United Methodist Church at 32nd and Barrett, Richmond, purchased a Wurlitzer (Opus 939) as an interim step from the Leandro Theatre. With the help of Bob Kates a teenager, (now of Swain and Kates, San Francisco) the organ was soon ready for sacred music. At this time the Wurlitzer lost its toy counter in exchange for chimes. Jane Critchfield (Louella Sanders' aunt) became organist and continued until late 1974, 33 years. She and Cal now live in Sonora.

When Larry Weid bought the Wurlitzer theatre organ in 1968, it signalled the start of a new organ fund for St. Lukes. A plug-in provided by Jim was used from then on (probably helped raise money for pipes). Six years later the new pipe organ was ready.

On January 19, 1975, Jane Critchfield was called back to play the inaugural concert on the German built 15 rank custom baroque organ. During the ceremony, the minister remarked he had read of the Golden Bear Playhouse and the fine home for the old organ (and he might have added: "If you get tired of baroque and you long for those Tibias, you might remember every September is Fair time and a short trip to Sacramento will bring back some nostalgia.")

It's that nostalgia that keeps ATOS growing and growing. But now I have to think of getting ready for April 20 to continue the saga of Opus 939. See you then - Jane Critchfield too, I hope.

Harvey Whitney is in charge of the George A. Seaver Memorial Organ installation, hence the reference to having to get ready for April 20. On that Sunday, Sierra Chapter will dedicate their club organ to the memory of their first vice chairman, whose fondest dream was for the club to have its own instrument.

Clyde Derby, Emil Martin (Sacramento organists) and W. "Tiny" James of Oakland will play the concert. These artists played the concert which marked Mr. Seaver's passing some three years ago. George had requested no funeral, no formal memorial services, but it would be fine with him if his friends wanted to gather around a theatre pipe organ and play his type of music. This they did on the former Seattle, Washington, Music Hall, 4/16 Robert Morton in the Sheraton Inn. The place was packed with George's many friends. James Hodges was the master of ceremonies and will repeat the function April 20. □