

THEY DON'T BUILD THEATRE ORGANS LIKE THIS ANYMORE

support the now-removed Cinerama screen, the pit was covered in 1953, mandating amplification of the chamber there, but better-than-even chances are quoted for having the apron stripped away by Convention time.

The sets in the normally placed "left" and "right" chambers comprise what alone would make a plausible eleven-rank specification, needing little color or foundational support from the pit. The grills through which these high-set chambers speak once blended perfectly with the dark finish of the upper walls, but since the redecoration, this effect has been lost.

The "echo" chamber sits directly atop the old projection room and speaks through the lighting coves and open ceiling. It is a complete, autonomous division; playable on the Pedal, Orchestral and Solo registers. Despite the great separation of the divisions, the organ's sound is coherent, a characteristic due largely to the well-planned independence of its major parts.

The massive four-manual console — at which presided the likes of Buss McClelland, Henri LeBel and Eddie Horton during its heyday — originally sat at pit-center on a combined elevator and turntable. Inaccessible from below since the stage apron was built, the console was moved out of the pit three years ago to permit its use in a stage show, with its return pending the opening of the pit.

In recent years, this unusual machine has been concertized upon by Gaylord Carter and George Wright in addition to its occasional use by ATOS and various short-term lessees of the facility; and has been recorded for Doric Records by Tiny James. Always playable, the organ has been kept, since 1953, by veteran organ buff and ATOE charter member Ron Downer.

As the Orpheum organ is seldom heard by the public, and the house's capacity is far in excess of Convention needs, tickets to Jim Roseveare's program are to be offered for general sale, as are those for John Seng's at the Paramount. Pre-register by July 1, or simply stop by the Hilton on July 15 between noon and nine. We'll be happy to see you, and you'll be glad you came! □

This article appeared in the August 1974 issue of the BROADCASTER, published by and for employees of Delco Electronics Division, General Motors Corporations, Kokomo, Indiana, and is printed here by special permission.

Words are simply not adequate to describe the music that pulses forth from the magnificent theatre organ that Delco retiree Frank May has reconstructed in his home. So we will have to settle for lesser things like how and why he built it.

This is not the modern kind of organ you might see advertised on TV, guaranteed to belt out *Home on the Range* after three days of finger exercises. Rather, what Frank has built is an instrument of the type that once filled with music the great, palatial movie houses of the 1920s and 30s.

Frank and Frances May, members of Central Indiana Chapter, at the console of the 4/19 Barton.

Giant, ornate theatres like the Indiana in Indianapolis or the Fox or Michigan in Detroit all had elaborate organs that simulated orchestrated music for the silent films of that period. A relatively elite group of talented and well-paid organists traveled the country playing them.

With the advent of talking pictures, theatre organ popularity began to wane though the instruments remained for several years providing music between movies and during interludes. Nearly obsolete in the modern cinemas of today, the tradition of the theatre organ and its music is now being preserved by hobbyists like Frank and his wife who have taken great pains to



restore and reconstruct the instruments in their homes.

A long-time theatre organ buff, Frank began the meticulous work of restoring and building one in his home in 1966 when he retired from Delco after 20 years in the engineering and quality control departments.

"I suppose I first became fascinated with theatre organs as a boy when I used to hear them in theatres in Elkhart (Ind.) and Chicago," says Frank. "I can remember seeing the movies twice just to listen to the thrilling music.

"When I retired, I viewed building an organ as a project that would both keep me active and call on my experience in the field of electronics."

Working with knowledge accumulated from a life-long study of theatre organs, Frank purchased several of the old instruments, one of which had been transplanted from a theatre to a Muncie Church where it had been used for 25 years. He obtained another fine Barton organ from Chicago radio station WLS.

He has added a sizable room to his home west of Kokomo to accommodate the more than 1,400 organ pipes. The same room houses the maze of electronics he substituted for pneumatic devices used to convert finger pressure on the console's four keyboards to music escaping from the pipes.

"At any given time, an average of six fingers are touching keys on the

console," says Frank. "When this happens, music is coming from literally hundreds of pipes, all controlled in computer-type fashion by the electronics."

With most of the components of the eight-ton instrument having been collected from other old organs, Frank pegs the average age of his organ at 50 years — not including the space age electronics.

Frank and his wife, Frances, are members of the 5,000-member American Theatre Organ Society (800 of the members have built theatre organs in their homes) and spend much of their time traveling throughout the country attending concerts and meetings of theatre organ enthusiasts.

Frank modestly asserts that he is a technician and not a performer, yet by way of lessons taken since his retirement he has sharpened his skills at the keyboard. He now plays the likes of *Lady of Spain* and *Fascination* with ease and smoothness.

Are there any problems associated with having the volume of sound in one's home that was originally intended to fill a theatre or arena? Not at all. And to make sure the neighbors don't get blown out, the May house is triple insulated.

Frank and his wife extend a welcome to Delco friends interested in pipe organs to listen to or play their unique instrument. □

Frank is dwarfed by some of the 1,400 organ pipes housed in a special room he built onto his home.



VOX POPS



Conducted by Stu Green

Readers are encouraged to submit interesting sidelights on the organ hobby (exclusive of chapter news items) material they believe will be of general interest about local organ activities and installations and the people who work at the hobby. We know "there's VOX POPS in them there chapters" and it only requires an 8 cent postcard to get it to VOX POPS Editor, Box 3564, Granada Hills, California 91344. If the contributor can afford a 10 cent stamp, why not include a black and white photo which need not be returned.

Dr. Roger Elser reports from Charleston, West Virginia, that the 3/17 Uniphone organ, removed from the Rivoli theatre in Indianapolis, is now in storage, is for sale, and that owner Tom Ferree told him that he (Tom) and his crew would be glad to help the purchaser install the beloved instrument in a new home. Reading between the lines, there's a tinge of sadness apparent. Tom and his crew worked very hard to make the Rivoli installation a paying proposition.



Speaking of the Rivoli theatre, at least the future of its Barton lift is assured. The Central Indiana Chapter's April NEWSLETTER reports that it has been purchased by Phillip Hedback to raise and lower the console in the local Hedback Community theatre after the 2/10 Page organ has been installed, with chapter help. Mr. Hedback's hobby is classic autos.

