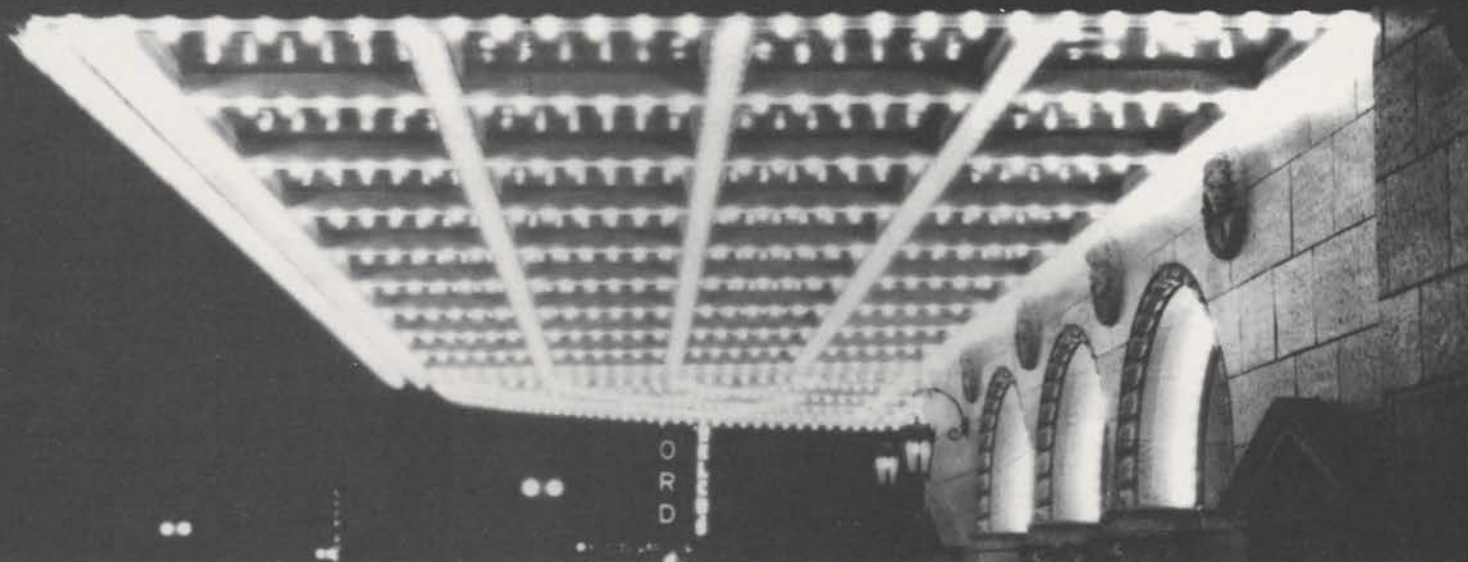


GEORGE JOHNSON OMAHA'S PREMIER ORGANIST



by Lloyd E. Klos

Mr. Johnson received top billing on the marquee of Omaha's 3000-seat Riviera (now Paramount) Theatre. (Johnson collection)

When we first met Potomac Valley Chapter's George R. Johnson in Seattle in 1971, we wondered if he were related to the George A. Johnson who was supposed to have opened the Brooklyn Paramount in November 1928. We were informed that there is no relation between organ enthusiast and organist.

About a year later, Byron Melcher, Thomas Organ Co. representative and personal friend of the organist, suggested a feature story on Mr. Johnson. The latter was agreeable to furnishing details and pictures "of my checkered career, the only real feature being I have been in music all my life."

George A. Johnson was born in 1904 in a Lutheran parsonage in Warren, Pa. He was educated in the Warren public schools and Bellefonte Academy in Bellefonte, Pa. At the age of 12, he was assistant organist at First Lutheran Church in Warren. "I practiced movie music on the church instrument — between Bach and Franck." He credits his first public appearance at the console to a snowstorm. One wintry Sunday morning, the regular organist was snowbound at home, so George, proud and happy, played his first service. He had been studying organ for only four weeks!

When 14, he joined the Musicians'

Union and played piano, saxophone, clarinet and xylophone with a number of bands. At 16, he was organist at the Liberty Theatre in Herkimer, N.Y., playing a 3/16 Moller. Next came a two-year stint at Shea's Buffalo 4/28 Wurlitzer. Later, he was featured for two sessions at the Virginia Theatre's 3/24 Moller in Charleston, W. Va. There were also engagements in Shea's theatres in Jamestown, N.Y., and Bradford, Pa.

Becoming more ambitious to rise in the musical world, Mr. Johnson went to Chicago where he enrolled in the Chicago Music College (now Roosevelt University). Eventually, he

did special study at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., and the University of Omaha.

His piano teachers were Dr. LeRoy Campbell, R.O. Suter and Cecil Berryman. Organ instructors were Dr. Louis Potter, C. Gordon Wedertz, William R. Boone and Louise Zabriskie. His studies eventually earned him the A.A.G.O. award in 1942.

"While attending CMC, I played evenings at many suburban theatres, among them the Auditorium Theatre in Berwyn, Ill., which had a 4/10 Robert Morton. Early in 1927, I got a call from Jack Kalver, my "patron saint," of Leo Fiest Inc., about a three-week guest appearance at Chicago's Harding Theatre in Logan Square. This was a large deluxe house with stage band, second-run top features from downtown and a 3/15 Wurlitzer.

"I accepted the position, and on my first day, stopped the show cold, using a solo which Henri A. Keates had used downtown at the Oriental Theatre. The real reason for the success of my stint was that the headliners were Freeman J. Gosden and Charles Correll, then known as 'Sam and Henry,' broadcasting over WGN, but later to be known as 'Amos 'n' Andy.' Each show had a packed house which was the perfect dream of every organist in Chicago.

"That appearance led to an audition at the Chicago Theatre on Jesse Crawford's splendid Wurlitzer in March 1927. I was offered the solo organist spot at the new 3,000-seat Riviera Theatre to be

opened in Omaha. Henry B. Murtagh, who was organist at the Chicago, advised me to take the job as I would last longer in a smaller city where the publicity was better. He re-wrote one of my solos and showed me how comedy was of value in slide presentations. A wonderful man, Henry B. Murtagh, and a great showman."

A faded clipping from VARIETY, dated March 26, 1927, describes the opening of the Publix Riviera Theatre: "The newest link, and a big, bright, shining one in the Publix theatre chain, was added today when the beautiful Riviera at 20th and Farnum opened.

"Its premiere was held last evening . . . Those present included the elite of Omaha and Nebraska society, state and county officials and a large party of Publix and Paramount officials . . . The new amusement palace seats 3,000 and represents an investment of 2½ million. Designed by John Ebersson, it is the very latest thing in atmospheric thought . . .

"Adolph Menjou's 'Evening Clothes' was the feature, but the first picture to hit the sheet was a news shot (Kinograms). The stage show consisted of 'An Indian Legend' with special scenery and a ballet of 10 . . . Another stage turn was 'The Inaugural Banquet.' House orchestra of 20 was conducted by Nathaniel W. Finston, but regularly will be under the direction of Frederick Schmidt.

"At the console of the organ, George A. Johnson scored the individual hit of the evening with 'Organs I Have Played.' It was the Jesse

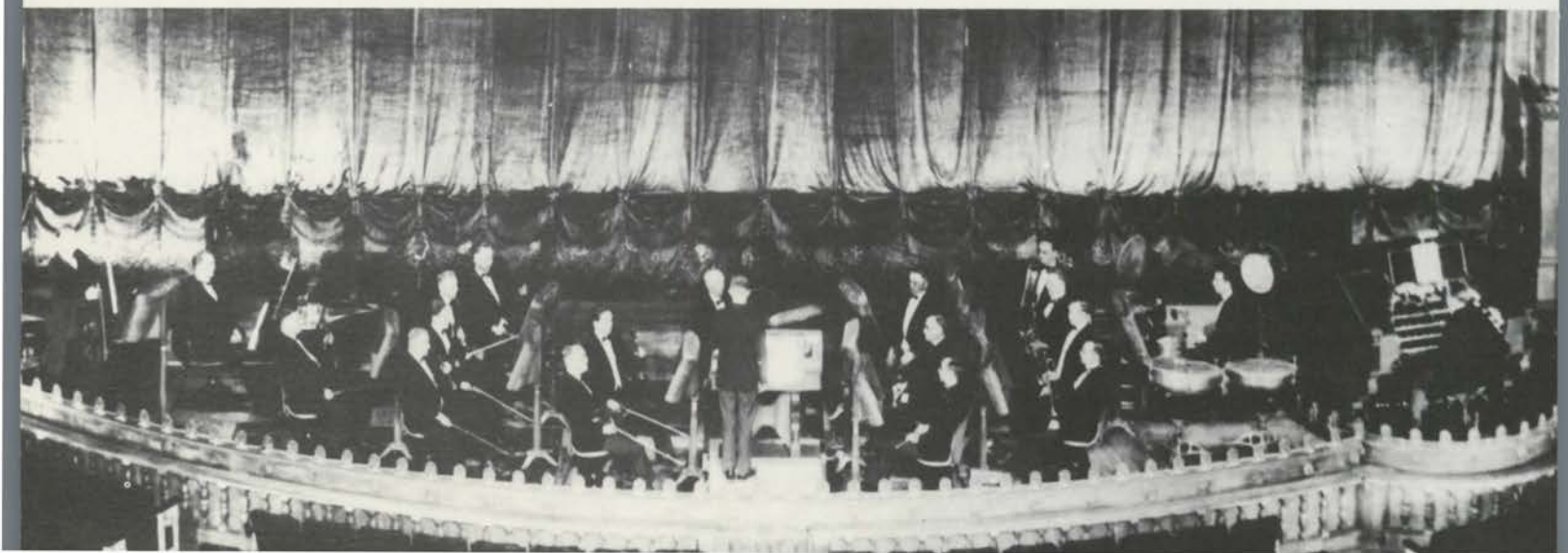
Crawford novelty and stopped things for a few minutes. Another innovation was the perfect Publix Service rendered by the corps of snappy appearing ushers and attendants, strictly a la Paramount, New York."

A feature of Mr. Johnson's playing at the Riviera was the classical program he did each Sunday noon and attended by most appreciative audiences. These were broadcast over WOW, Omaha. He was considered one of the most popular radio artists in the middle west, and one of the first concert organists to play on the major networks.

"I worked up a stunt with George Getsey which created a great deal of comment. It was written up in the theatre organ column in THE METRONOME in July 1928. I quote: 'After 75 consecutive weeks, during which time he has not missed a single performance (four a day), George Johnson has been at the Riviera since it was opened. Johnson has been hitting from all angles lately, using community singing, comedy, audience plants and straight solos. George Getsey (Leo Fiest man) and he worked out a very good stunt in which Johnson starts out with a classical solo, only to be annoyed by Getsey who was blowing his nose and making sarcastic remarks to those about him. Getsey was in the second row behind the organ console. Much burned up, Johnson jumped to his feet and argued. The result was that Getsey came up and sang with the organ. It went over very big and was the talk of the circuit.'"

The music department of the Riviera Theatre in Omaha, with organist Johnson at the Wurlitzer console, in the days when the organ was used with the orchestra in certain presentations.

(Johnson collection)



While at the Riviera, he learned that the son of a prominent piano teacher, Cecil Berryman, was greatly interested in the organ. The boy, seven-year-old Edward played piano so well that Mr. Johnson had him play a Bach prelude and a Beethoven minuet as a special matinee attraction. His performance was a success and the young musician was hooked on pipe organ. Today, he is organist and music director at one of the largest churches in Minneapolis.

As was often the case in the days of the theatre organ, if the house organist featured a song, his picture appeared on the sheet music. In 1927, George Johnson's picture appeared on the front cover of *When You Play With the Heart of a Girl*, music by Thomas Bruce and lyrics by Earl Haubrich.

In November 1928, the Brooklyn Paramount opened. Mr. Johnson now corrects a long-held misconception. "I never opened the Brooklyn Paramount. How the story got into Ben Hall's writings and record jacket notes, I don't know. I do not remember twin consoles at the Brooklyn Paramount. The organ was impressive, but nothing in comparison to Jesse Crawford's 4/36 Wurlitzer in the New York Paramount. In some early publicity for the theatre, however, I was slated to be associate organist with Henry B. Murtagh, and was even on the local 802 roster. But, at that moment, Paramount-Publix took over Fox West Coast Theatres, and they offered me the Portland Paramount. My wife was terrified of Brooklyn, but we both liked the West Coast."

So, George Johnson was sent to Portland, Oregon, to open the 4/20 Wurlitzer in the 3,000-seat Paramount. "I did straight solos, solos with pit orchestra, slide solos, but very little community singing. Henry 'Hot Lips' Busse was master of ceremonies, and Harry Linden directed the pit orchestra. Portland is a musical town, and I think I could have gotten away with a Bach fugue there.

"An amusing thing happened to me in Portland. I had a large, white English bulldog, named Chauncey, who was the pride of my eye. He used to rest in my dressing room and I would walk him between shows. One day, as I was doing my solo,

someone let him out of my dressing room. When he heard the organ, he started to look for me. Imagine my surprise when I saw Chauncey in the spotlight! He got more applause than I did!"

Following the Portland tenure, Mr. Johnson played several theatres in the middle west: Capitol in Des Moines (3/12 Wurlitzer); Paramount in Cedar Rapids (3/12 Wurlitzer); Paramount in Waterloo, Iowa (3/10 Barton); Orpheum in Omaha (3/12 Wurlitzer); and the Military in Omaha (2/6 Wurlitzer). He played the last named theatre in 1932, and in 1941, he returned to the Riviera in Omaha which had been renamed the Paramount.

He was affiliated with radio stations in Omaha as staff organist, including WOW, KOIL, KFAB, and KOWH.

Earlier, we mentioned Henry B. Murtagh's advice to George to take the position as organist in a smaller city because the publicity was much greater. Looking through yellowing newspaper ads, we see such super-

latives as "George Johnson, Master Organist at the Golden-Voiced Riviera Wonder Organ . . . A Tribute to Lindbergh by George Johnson, Omaha's Prince of Music . . . Extra today: Organ Recital, starting at 12:30 P.M. . . . George Johnson at our mighty organ and Omaha's Hit Parade Community Sing . . . Hear this great organist, entertainer and humorist of organ novelty presentation."

When Publix was a big factor in theatre entertainment, it handed out weekly program booklets to the patrons called "Publix News." In the June 1, 1928 Omaha issue, is a column entitled "The Music Box," in which our subject served as writer. These are some excerpts:

"Whew! Excuse me, folks, if I seem all dusty and tired. But, it does keep me burrowing into my library to keep up with music for these nationalistic concerts we've been giving at the Riviera Theatre every Sunday noon. Italian, German, Bohemian, Irish, Swedish, Jewish. I've had to hunt up music to suit

George Johnson instructs talented seven-year-old Edward Berryman at the Riviera organ. Today, Berryman is organist and musical director of one of the largest churches in Minneapolis.

(Johnson collection)



them all, and I've Polish, Scottish, Russian, Spanish, and I don't know what, yet to contend with. But, none of them has stumped me so far, so I guess we'll hit it off to the end. (We had guest soloists, choral organizations, and various other mid-west talent, most of whom appeared for free).

"One of the nice things about being a theatre organist is that you get copies of all the brand-new song hits. All of you folks soon will be singing 'My Bouquet of Memories,' a new ballad, and two new fox trots, 'Without You, Sweetheart' and 'Coquette.' Gene Austin has just released a record 'Without You, Sweetheart.'

"Now that Paul Spor (Riviera orchestra conductor) has started his 'Whoopee Club,' I expect even better results than usual when I ask you folks to sing. We'll organize some sort of 'vocal athletics' division to the club. And then watch out when we get to singing!

"By the way, folks, I'll need some help on this column. If there's anything you'd like to know about the organ, music in general or about the theatre, drop me a line. I'll answer it.

"Guess I'll go horseback riding. I play golf, too, but I like horseback better. I figure out most of my solos while riding along the trails north of Florence. The other day, a friend asked me why I like riding better. I told him it was because the horse never stops to ask, 'What did you take on the last hole?'

"Gee, there goes my buzzer, signaling that I must get onto the organ bench. See you all next week."

George

When he joined Omaha's Military Theatre, the daily press ran this item, surrounded by a smiling picture of our subject:

"George says it's a sweet-toned organ, all newly rebuilt. That's the one he is to play at the Military Theatre. Remember George Johnson? But of course you do. Even if he were to put on a disguise, he'd be sure to betray himself. For he can't get rid of that good-natured smile.

"He begins his engagement at the Military, doing a novelty presentation to illustrate what diversity of effects the pipe organ can produce. Every evening, he will play, and each Sunday.



When the Riviera Theatre in Omaha became the Paramount, the organ console was given a coat of light-colored paint. (Johnson collection)

"One thing I plan to do," he was saying, "is to revive the singing bee. Once people get into the way of community singing, they like it. What's more, it's good for them."

You can readily see from the above that Henry B. Murtagh knew what he was talking about. Publicity in the small towns was much better than in the cities, advertising

George Johnson at the Paramount 4/20 Wurlitzer in Portland, Oregon, in 1929. Notice the carbon microphone at left. This organ was featured at two ATOS conventions; in 1966 and in 1973. (Johnson collection)



in the latter being more sophisticated, and the artists being taken for granted.

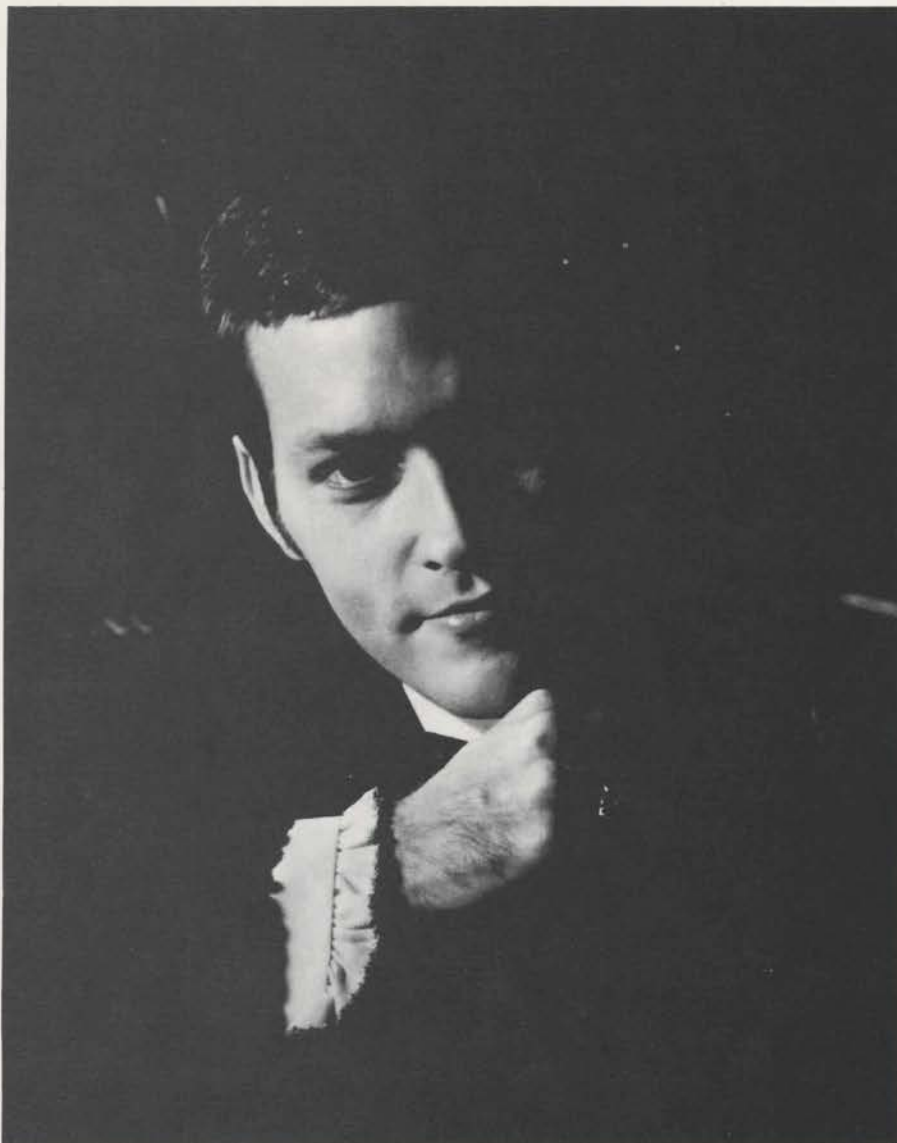
Through the years, George Johnson has also been a church musician. He was with the First Baptist Church in Omaha for 13 years, playing a 4/26 Austin. He played at the First Methodist Church in Warren, Pa., on a 4/29 Austin and at the First Lutheran Church in Jamestown, N.Y., for 10 years on a 4/49 Casavant in a large cathedral-type auditorium. Virgil Fox gave two concerts there during his tenure. At present, George plays an Allen in the United Presbyterian Church in North Warren, Pa.

We mentioned earlier that one of the instruments George played, a 3/12 Wurlitzer, was in Omaha's 2900-seat Orpheum Theatre. This instrument was restored several years ago by local ATOS members, and recently, according to Johnson, "I have had correspondence with friends in Omaha who tell me that interests are trying to take over the theatre and make it into a concert hall. This would be similar to Loew's Penn in Pittsburgh, and in St. Louis where the former St. Louis Theatre was transformed into Powell Symphony Hall with the perfect acoustics retained."

For five years, George Johnson toured 40 states for the Humorous Music Appreciation Program. He has been a teacher for over 35 years. From 1935-1954, he owned and operated the Modern Music Studios in Omaha. In June 1954, he opened the George Johnson studios in Warren, Pa.

He serves as musical director of Warren State Hospital wherein are housed three electronics and a real collector's item — a Hook and Hastings tracker-action organ. Music therapy is done here, using closed circuit television. "I use a lot of my old material and the patients love it. For our new Faith Chapel, we have a computer-type Allen that was installed in this ultra modern building." He gives recitals and concerts, and has lectured at schools and colleges, discussing modern music.

A pleasant and informal man, George A. Johnson looks a good deal younger than his 68 years. He and Mrs. Johnson have a son, George, Jr. and four grandchildren. □



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