



RON RHODE

Young Man With A Pipe-Studded Future

by Bert Brouillon

Ron does his stint at the Phoenix Organ Stop No. 1. It's a fine 4/28 built up from a 3/14 by Harvey Heck who removed it from the Hollywood Egyptian theatre circa 20 years ago. The console is from the St. Louis Missouri Theatre. (Al Ruland Photo)

There's an organist waiting in Phoenix, Arizona — waiting for the opening of a pizza parlor equipped with pipes where he will preside at the console in the town's second such pasta emporium.

Actually, he isn't just waiting. He keeps busy playing the electronic at Organ Stop #2 when he isn't travelling to out-of-town concerts at perhaps the Old Town Music Hall in El Segundo, Calif., as he did in February, or the Auditorium Theatre in Rochester, N.Y., as he did in May.

Ron Rhode was born in Moline, Illinois, 23 years ago. He first showed interest in music at the age of four and was therefore given piano lessons. He was often seen at local entertainments as a "child wonder" at the 88. Inevitably, the organ came to the lad's attention and he was drawn to it, an electronic, of course. Much later he discovered the source of the sounds he heard synthesized in the electronic organ — pipes. Ron re-arranged his goals; he just had to play on pipes. He heard about the 4/30 Wurlitzer-equipped Organ Stop in Phoenix and went there to audition for Bill Brown, the builder/owner of the town's first pipe-equipped

pizzeria. He was hired as a counterpart of the silent film era's "relief organist." He and Charlie Balogh played when Lyn Larsen was ill, on a concert tour, or just had a night off. A lad of Ron's talent and ability wouldn't be satisfied with a number two spot unless it had promise of better things to come. Luckily, Bill Brown's plans called for more Organ Stops. One such project was outlined very well by *Phoenix Gazette* staffer Jim Newton in a Spring issue of the daily (updated in October).

Spread out over two levels of a Northwest Phoenix warehouse are hundreds of pipes, electrical switching devices and other parts that, by late Fall, once more will be a theatre pipe organ capable of sending shivers down the back of the growing number of fans.

The organ being refurbished now will be the center of attraction in the Valley's second Organ Stop pizza restaurant, located in Mesa.

It's one of four theatre pipe organs stored in the warehouse, which Organ Stop owner William P. Brown built for the purpose.

Brown, an organ buff since he was a teenager, opened the first Organ

Stop as a place to house another organ he had acquired "and to make some money with it."

Brown believes he will spend some \$32,000 in refurbishing the organ designated for the Mesa facility. The organ itself came from the Old Denver Fox Theatre, and cost him approximately \$8,000.

He and nine assistants have been working on the organ, with some parts being sent elsewhere for work. For instance the keyboards were sent away for repairs and new coverings on the keys. Organ hobbyists are repairing other parts. The worn-out leather is being replaced with special organ plastic.

"Leather just isn't tanned like it used to be," Brown admitted. "The organs get a lot of use. At Organ Stop No. 1 it's played more than 50 hours a week for lunches, evenings and rehearsals."

Although the Mesa organ resembles the presently used No. 1 unit in appearance, Brown has used a different arrangement of its parts for better visual display — a big part of the fun of an evening of listening to the organs.

"The console will be in a pit and

will rise six feet during performance so you can watch the footwork easily," he said.

Also to make viewing easier, the restaurant floor is sloped as in a theatre, according to Tom Rousseau, Organ Stop manager. That means tables and benches had to be built especially for the room, "so your pizza and beer don't slide off."

A variety of special attachments, such as the "toy box" with drums and other percussion instruments, are spread across the wall in front of each chamber to make viewing easier.

Brown is considering the addition of short silent movies, since the organs originally were designed to provide accompaniment for silent films. The Organ Stop No. 1 currently has sing-along slide presentations like theatres used to offer between films.

Assisting Brown in the restoration are Wendall Shultz, Charles Balogh and John Ferguson, two of five organists on the restaurant's staff, Randy Gooddard, Greg Bailey, Charlie Patterson, Alan Tury, Donna Parker MacNeur and Jonna Umber.

Shultz has a vast background in such work.

"I started out as an organ technician and mechanic, but when the depression hit I went to work for the Weather Bureau," he explained.

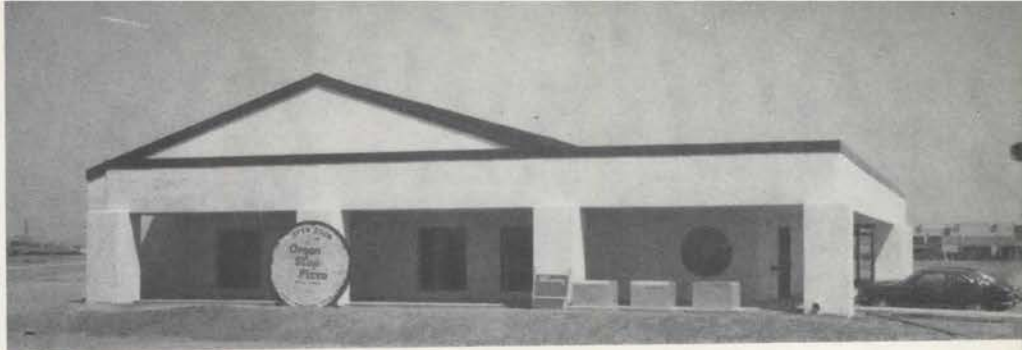
He's now retired, and spending "more time than I like to think about" working on the myriad delicate parts.

The Organ Stop No. 2 opened on June 20, but without the 3/23 Wurlitzer. Located near the intersection of Dobson at 2250 W. Southern in Mesa (a "stone's throw" from Phoenix), the pizza emporium is using an electronic until the Wurlitzer has been installed. Ron Rhode doesn't mind the substitution at all — because if all goes according to plan there will be a grand opening of the pipe organ in November — with Ron at the console.

Meanwhile, as our photos indicate, Ron has been watching the rebuilding of the instrument he will play with keen interest. He has visited the warehouse often to observe progress made by bossman Brown and able assistants.

The organ-playing future of Ron Rhode looks bright, indeed. □

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Organ Stop No. 2 — under construction.



Owner Bill Brown, Tom Rousseau and Ron Rhode at the groundbreaking for Organ Stop No. 2, December 6, 1974.

When things are slow Ron visits the big Brown warehouse chock-full of organs in various stages of repair. Here he examines the keys he'll be playing in Organ Stop No. 2 — if they can only line up the keys on the bottom manual. (Al Ruland Photo)

