

HOUSTON AREA CHAPTER CHARTERED!

Story by William H. Tunstall
Photos by George R. Hockmeyer

May 15, 1977 was a great day in Texas for on this day Houston area theatre organ buffs met in a magnificent new pizza palace to form a new chapter for South Texans. The pizzeria, Pipe Organ Pizza, had its formal opening on April 27, 1977, when the Mighty 3/31 Wurlitzer sounded for the first time in a public place in Houston since the mid-thirties.

Mr. E.D. Wood, owner of Pipe Organ Pizza, came to Houston from Dallas to build a real pizza palace with a great organ. His dream materialized with the competent help of film-oriented decorators, who have surrounded us with graphic art representing the Golden Age of the Movies. Also hailing from the Dallas scene is Jerry Bacon, director of mu-

sic and master of the console. Jim Connors, a music major at the University of Houston, presides as assistant organist, coming from Wilmington, Delaware, where he cut his organ teeth on the Dickinson Kimball.

If this writer can be granted license to coin a word describing Pipe Organ Pizza, it would be "fantabulous," for it is truly both fantastic and fabulous. The air of fantasy is everywhere. On one sky-blue, cloud bedecked wall, float gayly colored hot-air balloons carrying such stars

Editor's Note: This article which was written and planned for the last issue of our magazine was lost for awhile but, as so often is said, better late than never.

as Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chaplin, Shirley Temple, Mae West and the Marx Brothers, on neatly and artistically hand-painted cut-out plaques. Colored film strips along a wall over the serving counters depict Mickey Mouse characters, while each frame of a giant strip of black and white movie film bears the likeness of a famous star: — Greta Garbo, Clark Gable, William S. Hart and a host of others.

At the entrance waiting-line corridor, a life-sized cut-out of a red vested, usher-attired Charlie Chaplin greets you, while a long line of Keystone Cops on the right wall are chasing a paddy wagon filled with pizzas stolen by an escaped convict. Then there are overhead bubble machines, tight rope riders, revol-

The organ chambers are visible from the sidewalk in the Memorial City Shopping Center.





Jim Connors, assistant organist at Pipe Organ Pizza, Houston, Texas.



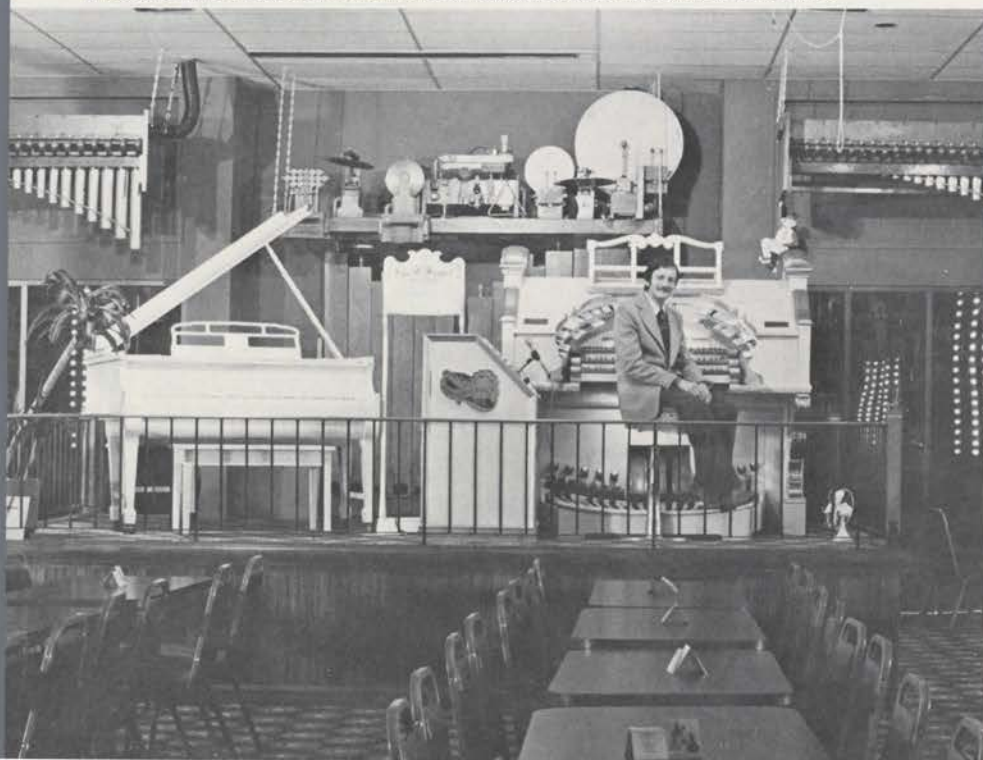
Jerry F. Bacon, senior organist and musical director at Pipe Organ Pizza, Houston.



ing crystal balls — it's all there . . . in fabled fantasy.

The magnificent gleaming gold and white French styled console and baby grand piano, are neatly perched on a fenced platform in front of the massive glass-enclosed and multi-shuttered pipe chamber. Breathtaking is the word. Suspended in front of the pipe chamber are all the traps, harps, xylophones, marimbas and glockenspiels. Of course, the train whistle and bell are there. In fact, it's all there with 31 ranks.

A patron's view of the platform which boasts, in addition to the console, a baby grand piano.



Some are rare, like the 1910 original Hope-Jones Post Horn and Trombone, not to mention the Tibia Plena, Brass Trumpet, and above all a real Gottfried French Horn.

The organ was originally a 3/13 Wurlitzer in the St. George Theatre, Staten Island, New York, in 1929. Other ranks from various sources were added here in Houston. The installation is the dedicated and masterful work of the Sandling Pipe Organ Company of Dallas. Jim Sandling can play the organ as mas-

terfully as he can install one. Work began on location January 8 and in less than four months, Sandling was able to meet the formal opening with 22 ranks playing. Now complete, the organ speaks through almost 2,000 pipes which are visible at street level, showcased across a 100-foot storefront-type structure in Memorial City Shopping Center. This is the largest theatre pipe organ in the immediate five state area.

An automated movie projector, similar to those used on airlines, throws a large clear picture onto a screen above and behind the console. The organist thus has a full view of the picture and can provide organ accompaniment to silent films. Moreover, pizza patrons are regaled nightly with live skits featuring Mickey and Minnie Mouse, Donald Duck and a circus clown.

The chapter had a wonderful turnout for its first meeting, with temporary officers: William H. Tunstall, chairman, Robert E. Cormier, vice chairman, John S. Nichols, secretary, and Lewis W. Matteson, Jr., treasurer. Among those playing were Al Sacker, theatre organist from Beaumont, Texas, and Fred Gibbons, former theatre organist of Houston. Our new chapter promises to thrive in the fabulous facility furnished by Mr. E.D. Wood. We express our sincere gratitude to him. □