

# CHAUNCEY HAINES

## The Era of Rediscovery

As told to Stu Green. Photos are from the Haines Collection.

### Part III

Chauncey Haines. The only organist, so far, elected to the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences.

(Long Photo)



### Foreword

*During our first installment, in our zeal to picture Chauncey Haines as a brash 1920's man of the world, we had him involved with booze, dames and fast cars. It seems we were only two-thirds correct; Chauncey admits to the fast cars and females, but not to the alcoholic refreshment. "Never could stand the taste of that stuff" says Chauncey, so we offer this correction and our humble apologies for inadvertently soaking Chauncey in demon rum. In our final installment, bone dry Chauncey tells how the public rediscovered the excitement and charm of silent film classics. He was ready.*

And now we come to what I call the "third era" in my musical adventures. We have dealt first with the time of the silent film and secondly with the great days of film sound track music, called by some "Hollywood's golden era." The third chapter isn't so easy to classify. Yet, it might be designated as "the era of rediscovery" because so many people of all ages have seemingly discovered a "new" art form — silent movies. Others have taken the old films into their hearts for what I prefer to call them — the classic masterpieces.

As strange as it may seem, the most voluble and ardent devotees of the silent classics are the young, often the very young. I have no words to describe the great satisfaction and enjoyment that has been mine, not only playing film accompaniments for these great kids, but also in giving symposiums, talks, lectures, or just mixing with them after a screening, telling them how it was when the films were new and live music in the-

atres was the norm. It is now a rare occasion when I am not rewarded with a round of applause before I even play a note; the audience anticipates something good is in store. And at the conclusion of a showing, the lid often comes off with an explosion of applause, as I unashamedly take bows on behalf of the great pioneer directors, Griffith and DeMille.

At this point I would like to explain why this audience acclaim is so heartfelt, and so appreciated. When I cued these same films on their first runs, a half century ago, they weren't received with one-third the measure of enthusiasm and enjoyment that are in the college classrooms and auditoriums of today. That's a somewhat recent phenomenon; how I used to dread being sent to play in college towns, whether in the Big Ten or Pacific Coast Conferences. It was a very different audience then, in every sense of the word. The attitude was reminiscent of the raccoon coat/bathtub gin/flapper era of long ago, when students came to the neighborhood houses near colleges not to be entertained but to raise some hell. And woe to any performer (or film) that provided the slightest opening, however small, for something to ridicule loudly. Yes, college audiences were tough ones, the anathema of many an old trouper, whether "on the boards" or in the pit. I must confess that my skin was thinner then and I'd go to any length to avoid any assignments that smacked of "college."

How differently I feel now! It's a whole new ball game. Student attitudes have changed drastically; they know why they are in college and they are serious in their studies. I have often expressed myself about the current generation of college students, even directly to the kids in the classrooms.

"You are the darndest looking bunch (considering the current mores in dress) but you are the greatest in terms of being wonderful human beings."

I don't know exactly when the great change took place; it must have been a gradual metamorphosis but I have been aware of it for the past ten years. I consider this to be the greatest of all generations, and I believe time will bear me out.

My career has also undergone a

metamorphosis, from straight theatricalism to pedagogy with a show biz slant, the "third era." It started slowly, back in 1950 I was asked by Harold Lloyd to prepare an organ score for a re-issue of *The Freshman*. This was recorded on a concert model Hammond in the United Artists studio. I was assisted by percussionist Harold Reece, a regular with Alfred Newman's 20th Century-Fox scoring orchestra. The film pulled good audiences wherever it was shown. This awakened me to the fact that audiences would still attend good silent film presentations. Shortly thereafter I was called on to host a Great Directors' Symposium before accompanying film presentations, with such famous directors as Henry King, Fritz Lang and King Vidor participating. This series was held in UCLA's wonderful Royce Hall. I again used the Hammond but I was intrigued by the console slumbering under wraps near the stage.

I don't mind admitting that I had "butterflies" aplenty as I tackled the Directors' series, with its dual challenges, but it apparently came off well; I was once more in the silent movie scoring business, but this time the sponsor was a respected university.

The pipe console continued to pique my curiosity, so one day I drummed up the courage to turn on



For campus excursions, Chauncey hauls along his trusty Hammond. 'It may not be as versatile as pipes, but it never lets me down.' (John O'Connor Photo)

the long-neglected instrument. It turned out to be a 4/73 Aeolian-Skinner with hall-filling volume. Of course there were dead notes, ciphers, and it was badly out of tune. But it had definite possibilities, in fact a whole orchestra-full.

Then came a most fortunate turn of events. Organist Tom Harmon was brought in to play some concerts. Tom is one of those gifted people with know-how in the organ chambers. He soon had the Aeolian-Skinner sounding wonderful, and then I could accompany the silent classics on a real pipe organ, albeit a "straight" one.

What a beautiful instrument Tom made of that organ! The transformation was fast and complete. I quickly fell in love with it, and have

Chauncey likes and performs all kinds of music. He's shown here whooping it up with a hillbilly group at Death Valley Scotty's Castle.





Chauncey at the console of his beloved 4/73 Aeolian-Skinner in UCLA's Royce Hall. 'Draw-knobs notwithstanding, she has a soul.' The instrument is used to cue the silent film series which have made students familiar with movie classics and with Chauncey Haines. (Stufoto)

accompanied most local silent film presentations on it ever since.

Meanwhile, the interest in classic films was growing. Students were demanding courses in film history. That's how I became a pedagogue. Once again the time was right. Other campuses also were experiencing the revival of interest in silents. So, for the past twelve years I have spread the gospel of this "new art form," usually doing a series of four showings annually at each location. The programs have taken me (and often my trusty Hammond) to Alaska, Arizona and up and down California. I am particularly fond of playing in Caltech's Beckman Auditorium (Pasadena) and I pulled a capacity crowd of film fans into a new and beautiful 1800-seat auditorium in Salinas for a showing of *The Iron Horse*. The personnel on military bases are always most appreciative, as are students at UC Santa Barbara. I do this travelling between series at UCLA's Royce Hall, my "home base." The more appreciation audiences show for my meagre talents, the harder I work to please them; it's most rewarding to the "ham" in my ego, and I have it.

Over the years I have developed a philosophy with regard to scoring films, thoughts undoubtedly influenced by the great film composers I have worked with.

In retrospect I blush at some of the "clever" things I did in my youth, such as using a tune that was related to the scene on the screen by title only. One of my prominent compatriots can be depended on to come up with "Time on My Hands" whenever a timepiece is shown on the screen, be it a Tiffany boudoir desk

clock, a big old vest pocket "turnip" or even Big Ben.

The great film composer Alfred Newman condemned this approach: "When I have taken the audience's mind off of the play by showing how cute I can be — then I have failed miserably in my whole purpose." That sums up reasons for my avoidance of gag-title cueing.

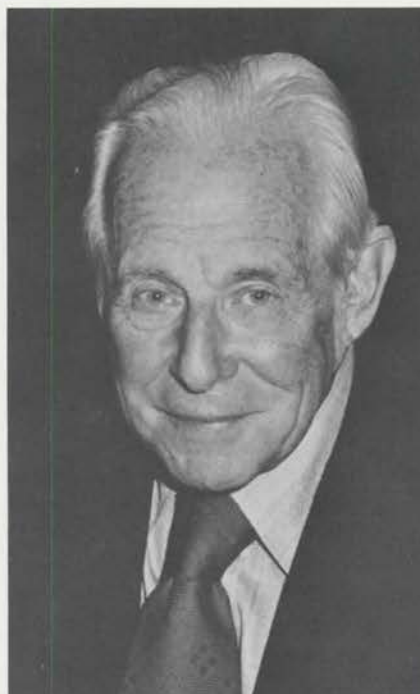
Of course I borrow liberally from my "idol scorers" and the classics, but only music which will advance the plot of the film by the mood it sets. I either avoid easily recognizable themes (they recall other experiences to the minds of the listeners) or I disguise or camouflage them through improvisation. I don't want my music to intrude or distract movie viewers. I even prefer to play in as close to darkness as possible, which I can do because my scores are all memorized. I just try to melt into the picture as unobtrusively as possible.

Occasionally I break my own rules. For example, at a screening of John Barrymore's *Beloved Rogue* during a recent show sponsored by the LA Professional Organists' Club at San Gabriel auditorium, I used Charlie Chaplin's "Terry's Theme" which he composed for *Limelight*. It just seemed to fit the situation and it isn't that well known.

How do I manage to keep all the music in my head? A reviewer for the *LA Times* wrote that "Haines must have total recall." I wish it were true. I thank my Maker many times


Chauncey, at 75, insists he'll never retire.

(Dan Ross Photo)



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for the retentive memory He gave me, but I spend many hours each day memorizing music and double-checking what I have stored. It's not easy, by any means.

While I have a platform, there's one plea I would like to make, one in support of more effective college courses in cinema studies and movie history. I first noticed the lack of first rate teaching when I started on the college circuit. Too often teachers with a couple of semesters of dramatics or film appreciation were trying to conduct classes in which the students knew more than the instructors. That's one reason for my success on the circuit. I could answer the numerous questions they asked about the film world from personal experience. I don't like to see those bright kids shortchanged in their quest for knowledge about what to me is an important and worthy subject. I would like to see film courses upgraded to the standards demanded by law or medicine.

Time to close this discourse and I'll try to do so on a note of personal triumph. It was the last film in my 1977 series of silent films presented



Not 'total recall' but hard work accounts for the Haines ability to retain long musical works over long periods of time, some from the 30s. Here Chauncey is shown in a 1967 photo during a 'woodshedding' session as he prepared a piano copy of a portion of the *Bonanza* TV score. He says the paper cup contained only coffee.

at UCLA's Royce Hall. The 4/73 Aeolian-Skinner was in perfect shape. The film was Harold Lloyd's *Grandma's Boy*, one of the films which established him as a feature length comedian. Things had gone very well and I was enjoying the applause. Suddenly, a man in the audience stood up and in a loud voice demanded more applause "for the world's finest theatrical organist!"

Ham that I am, it both pleased and embarrassed me. Who was this guy out there, making all the fuss?

It turned out to be none other than Meredith Willson, "The Music Man." Meredith is a long-time friend who surprised me by attending the final show, as have many

'Music Man' Meredith Willson visits with Chauncey after the latter accompanied a Harold Lloyd comedy double feature. (Stufoto)



celebrities during the season, including actors Buddy Ebsen, TV's *Barnaby Jones* and Will Geer, the Walton's grandpa. After the audience left, Meredith led me to the Green Room, and there was a reception in progress. I recognized film directors and producers, entertainment-oriented people from both the Academy and the Directors' Guild, mingling with pedants from UCLA and press people.

Meredith Willson anticipated the question forming in my mind: "It's for you, Chauncey."

"What a wonderful way to close a series." That's all I could say. There were my dearest friends, students, professors and those matchless show-biz folks partaking of a catered buffet. It was an emotional time for me, and I loved every moment.

But the end of the series doesn't mean the close of my playing career. I'm ready to play anyplace, most any time, if the conditions are right. And there will be another series of silents for me to cue on my beloved Aeolian-Skinner at UCLA. As a youth of 75, I'm much too young to think of retirement. In fact I'll never retire. My good Maker will let me know when my time is up, and He doesn't seem to be in any hurry." □

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