

Closing Chord

ALICE BLUE

She was a small woman, but her short stature belied the brimming vitality which was so much a part of her.

Alice Clemmer (originally Clemo) was a many-talented gal, and she left a distinct impression on all who met her. As a pianist and organist in the days when silent theatres were being wired for sound, she struggled to make a living in music, but supplemented her income with articles of topical interest which she sold to newspapers in the areas where she was working, Texas or California. She could type accurately better than 60 words a minute. When "Alice Blue Gown" was published in the '20s, Alice adopted it as her permanent theme tune, and she became "Alice Blue."

She was a veteran of the silent movie era in the USA but her big break came when she was hired to play the Robert Morton organs in Honolulu's Hawaii and Princess Theatres and at the Palace Theatre in Hilo. She played for intermissions between 1931 and 1934 at all three theatres but she preferred the Princess organ. "I loved the Princess Robert Morton more than any I ever played." During this period she

noticed a young man sitting down front, observing her technique. It was young John DeMello, soon to be the dominant name in Island theatre organ lore.

Of the resurgence of interest in the theatre organ in the '50s and early '60s, Alice was exuberant but felt like an anachronism: "Everybody, almost, concerned with the rebirth of pipes, is so much younger than I — I feel like a reincarnation!"

She first came to the attention of organ hobbyists in the early '60s. She lived in a northern California woodland cabin with her large shaggy dog and was employed to write a regular column for the *Guerneville Times*. Her subjects ranged from music to national politics, and she took special interest in the campus unrest of those years. Her comments were sharp and to the point, and they finally got her fired from the paper. Then she eked out a living playing in area bars and clubs for several years.

At one time she was so broke that she couldn't afford to attend the Home Organ Festival, then held at Hoberg's Resort, among the tall pines and rolling hills of northern California. Word got to the officials of the Festival, and they took up a collection so Alice could attend that year. Alice showed up with her tape playback and continually competed with the scheduled concerts by inviting crowds to her room to hear tapes she had made on her Hammond. She had no interest in listen-



Alice in her Guerneville, Calif., home in 1972, just before she went to play in Honolulu.

ing to other organists. When she had an audience, she wanted to be the star.

Some time later, she returned to pipes briefly for a joint concert at San Francisco's Avenue theatre. With no rehearsal time, she "winged it" on the Wurlitzer with audience-satisfying results, although she was heard to exclaim "I don't know what the hell I'm doing."

Yet, listeners were impressed by her applications of second touch, something she had learned in her youth while playing for silent movies. "I keep the second touch voices on the accompaniment manual on all the time. Never know when I'll need them," said Alice, "I don't have any special arrangements — I just play."

Alice had a brush with marriage but it didn't take. "At heart, I'm a loner," she insisted.

With the years mounting she turned back to Hawaii and during a visit landed a job playing a Hammond X66 in a Honolulu restaurant and watering hole. After several years of keeping the Mai Tai guzzlers happy, she met a man, quite a few years her junior, who proposed marriage, if she would move to his native Tonga. Alice, then in her 60's, accepted and rushed back to Guerneville to sell her property, then voyaged to Tonga, where she eventually built a house "close enough to the sea so I can roll down the hill and hit the water."

But the marriage never took place and the years mounted. About two years ago, sensing an end, Alice prepared letters to be mailed to friends at her passing.

Alice Blue died at age 79 in her Tonga home on September 3, 1977.



Alice Blue at Hawaii Theatre, Honolulu, 1931-1934.

The cause of death could easily be attributed to her advanced age, and indeed she was plagued by physical infirmities.

However, a better clue is in that final letter prepared two years before her passing.

Wrote Alice, "I died of a broken heart." Burial was in the European cemetery on the Tonga isle of Vava'u.

— Stu Green

Jay Golden, "Mr. Showman of Rochester, N.Y." for many years, died there on May 19. He was 86.

Originally a journalist in Albany, he managed theatres in Troy and Syracuse before coming to Rochester to oversee the RKO Palace in 1930. In 1937, he was named manager of the RKO-Paramount-Comerford pool in the city which included the Capitol, Century, Palace, Regent and Temple. His holding of many community benefits at the Palace gave him the "showman" monicker.

After World War II, Golden took over management of RKO theatres outside New York City, and later served as district manager of the Brooklyn-Albee division of RKO.

When the Palace was slated for demolition in 1965, it was Golden who worked as liaison between RKO and the Rochester Theatre Organ Society to secure the Wurlitzer organ for RTOS. For that effort, he was named the first Honorary Member of the Society in 1965.

He is survived by a sister, two nieces and two nephews.

Mrs. Lillian Gardner Truss, 77, of Birmingham, Ala., died September 25. She was a native of Alabama, the widow of the late Wylie DeWitt Truss, and is survived by two sons, 8 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.



Lillian Gardner Truss.

(Tom Hatter Photo)

Mrs. Truss began her career as church organist and was organist at the Bluff Park United Methodist Church in Birmingham for 35 years. In 1923, she became picture organist at the Rialto Theatre in Birmingham. During her theatre career, she also did picture work at the Trianon, Galax and Strand theatres. When the Alabama Theatre was built, Mrs. Truss gave a two-hour concert on the 4/20 Publix #1 Mighty Wurlitzer for the December 25, 1927 Grand Open-

ing Celebration. She remained at the Alabama doing picture work, and finally as soloist until the "talkies", and the raising of two sons officially ended her career.

She never stopped being active, however. She maintained an art studio for several years, and helped her son in his office up until her recent illness. A charter member of the Alabama Chapter, Mrs. Truss, already in her 70's, played several concerts at the Alabama Wurlitzer. She amazed her audience with an ability to play an entire program from memory even after a long absence from public work. At the age of 76, she played the Alabama Wurlitzer for a cooking school — mixing in modern music with the traditional.

This grand lady was loved by all who knew her, and her loss will be felt for a long time. While she never gained national prominence, she will always belong in our own "Hall of Fame."

Alleen Cole

Karl Bonawitz, 84, and "Mr. Theatre Organ of Philadelphia" during the instrument's early years, died at Newport Beach, Calif., on August 30.

A native of Philadelphia, he studied in London, and upon his return to Philadelphia, in 1913, played piano at Witherspoon Hall at \$12 a week. He then signed a long-term contract with the Stanley Theatre Co. as an organist. It is said he played 29 theatres in the Philadelphia area, including the Germantown, Stanley,

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Ogontz, Metropolitan, Fox, Carmen, and the Stanley in Atlantic City.

He served in the Fellowship of Theatre Organists, and broadcast over WIP, Philadelphia. When the Hammond electronic came out in 1935, he was a demonstrator at Wanamaker's. In the late thirties, he deserted the organ and moved to California "to play golf."

Mr. Bonawitz is survived by a son, Karl, Jr.; daughters Judy and Sonya; a sister, seven grand children and five great grandchildren. □



the letters to the editors

Letters to the Editor concerning all aspects of the theatre organ hobby are encouraged. Send them to the editor concerned. Unless it's stated clearly on the letter "not for publication," the editors feel free to reproduce it, in whole or part.

Address:

George Thompson
Editor
P.O. Box 1314
Salinas, Calif. 93902

Dear Mr. Thompson;

My reason for writing to you is to inform you and the many readers of our purchase of the 3/9 Wurlitzer Opus 2231.

This organ was originally shipped on September 14, 1939 to radio station KDKA in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where it was installed and used up until sometime in 1955 when it was then purchased by the Baldwin Community Church just a few miles outside of Pittsburgh.

The organ was originally a 3-manual special with 9 ranks, although in the church it had been expanded to a total of 18 ranks with some additions of their previous church pipe

organ.

We purchased only the 9 Wurlitzer ranks and the vibraphone and chimes. It also at onetime had a toy counter and the Glock which was not available from the church but an original Wurlitzer toy counter and Glock were furnished to us from the people we bought the organ from.

The nine ranks were as follows: Tibia, Flute, String, String Celeste, Diapason, Tuba, Vox, Post Horn, and Clarinet.

It has 4 tremos, 104 total stops on a single bolster. 7 of these stops are accomp. 2nd touch. It has two shoes for swell shades and a crescendo pedal that sets the complete organ. There are also 5 preset combination buttons for each manual and 5 preset buttons for the pedal registration.

We would like to know if any of the readers or artists (that might have played the organ) could furnish us some background information on the organ and maybe possibly have pictures, or records when in its original installation in the KDKA studios that they would be willing to share with us.

We would be very happy, after the organ is installed in our home, to furnish to your magazine an article and pictures of the removal of the organ from the church and installation in our home.

We would appreciate any information or cooperation from you or the readers. They can reach us by writing;

Gene D. or Mary Lou Bryant
8407 Columbus Ave., S.
Bloomington, Minnesota 55420

Dear Mr. Klos:

Thank you for sending copies of the June issue of THEATRE ORGAN, containing the feature on my mother, Gladys Goodding.

It has been much enjoyed by all who have seen and read your fine article.

Sincerely,

(Mrs) Maxine G. Magnuson

Dear Mr. Klos:

Editor George Thompson sent me copies of the April 1977 issue of THEATRE ORGAN Magazine with the article about me. It was overwhelming, to say the least. Many thanks, indeed.

I showed the letter of my induction

into the Theatre Organists Hall of Fame to officers of the 1200-member Elks Lodge #1672 in Winter Haven, Florida. This is the lodge for which I play every Thursday evening. They were very impressed, and reprinted the letter in *The Elks' Horn*, our monthly newsletter.

Thanks again and very best regards.

Sincerely yours,
John Gart

Dear Mr. Thompson,

I should mention that the job that you and your staff is doing is incredible. I would also like to say that Lance Johnson's column is certainly one of the best features of THEATRE ORGAN and most helpful and informative. The fact that he takes time to answer questions besides working at his regular job as an organ builder/technician says a lot for the man. And of course considering all the work that you and your staff do, that says a lot about the ATOS staff!

Sincerely,
Ken Ladner

Dear Mr. Thompson,

This is in answer to the several critics of my article published in your magazine of a year ago.

Perhaps my article should not have been simply titled ORGAN FLUE PIPES, but rather "The Physics and Acoustical Analysis of Organ Flue Pipes." Perhaps, too, I should have chosen a scientific journal to publish my findings, but I felt that it would get attention where it is most needed in a magazine such as THEATRE ORGAN.

My article was not written so that some amateur could experiment on an existing organ, because organ pipe voicing is a very precise and tricky subject, best left to a professional voicer.

My critics have all been voicers — my article was not aimed at them but, rather, as a scientific guide to organ builders.

My article does not say how an organ pipe should be built, as apparently several readers seem to imply, but rather, which factors contribute the most to why any given pipe sounds and performs the way it does, and how pipes could be built to satisfy a wide range of conditions. It might have been beneficial to have