

George Epstein

A Roxy Organist

by Lloyd E. Klos

Remembering the organists who played New York's great Roxy Theatre, one immediately recalls Chauncey Haines, Dr. C.A.J. Parmentier, Lew White, Emil Velazco, Dezso Von D'Antalfy and Frank White. Another organist who possessed the credentials to preside at the Roxy Kimball was George J. Epstein, who played it in its final days.

Mr. Epstein was born in New York City in 1900, started piano lessons at six, and in his words, "wasted eight years on piano until the teacher told my father he was throwing away his money. 'This kid will never play,' was his remark. It took eight years to reach this conclusion?"

"My brother, who was seven years my senior, started organ study with John Hammond, who was teaching for Wurlitzer in a studio on 42nd Street in New York. I went with him for his lesson each Saturday morning. Six months later, Hammond turned to me and asked when I would be ready to study organ. I went to the console and played everything he taught my brother. That was the beginning of my marriage to show business."

Mr. Epstein studied piano, organ and theory at the Damrosch Music Institute, then followed with a course in theatre organ presentation under John Hammond.

In 1916, George began playing organ and piano in vaudeville and silent movie houses. Through the twenties, he was organist at several of the presentation theatres in Brooklyn and on Broadway: the Cameo, Carleton, Capitol, Criterion, Rialto and Rivoli. "I was really



hooked by now, and Wurlitzer sent me out on jobs in silent movie theatres. I played most of the Broadway presentation houses on all types of pipe organs. I also demonstrated for Robert Morton, Kilgen and Kimball during the twenties."

In October 1927, Mr. Epstein served as organist at the new Fortway Theatre in Brooklyn, playing a Kilgen "Wonder Organ." Later on, he was to team up with Frederick M. Smith to operate the Kilgen Wonder Organ School at 1560 Broadway in New York. According to an advertising card, pupils received instruction on the Kilgen Wonder Organ, "a completely equipped, advanced unit type theatre organ." Special attention was given to theatre repertoire,

including classical, popular and jazz music. There was coaching for advanced players, and broadcasts over station WSOM on Mondays and Thursdays at 9 p.m.

"My last theatre position was as associate organist for 5½ years at the Roxy Theatre. One thing which was most important to Roxy was synchronization by the organist for silent films. My reputation for "playing pictures," as we called it, was good. Roxy had plenty of organ soloists, but he needed someone who knew the art of synchronization.

"I had done a thing with Erno Rapee for Vitaphone while he was scoring a film. He remembered this, and when Roxy was screaming for someone to play pictures, Rapee

called me. I was then playing at the Carlton Theatre for Bill Brandt. Roxy took Parmentier out of the same theatre previously.

"Brandt was so proud that he allowed me to leave without notice. He also came on stage and made a speech, stating that he was 'proud that Roxy had to come to Brooklyn for Parmentier and myself.' That's how I got the job; no audition. In fact, I never auditioned for any position during my whole career. Just lucky.

"There was no greater showman than Roxy. Although he ran his staff like a general of the marines (he was in the Marines in World War I), he was a pushover for any one of his people who needed help of any kind. No one was ever turned away. We were 800 employees, and Roxy was like a father to all of us. My 5½ year stay at the Roxy was the happiest period of my life. To all of us, the Roxy was home.

"I played until 1933, when they cut the cable and yanked the console from under me."

One of the items in Mr. Epstein's scrapbook is a menu card for a bonvoyage party, honoring Roxy composer-conductor, Erno Rapee. The event was held in the Mecca Temple in New York on May 6, 1929 for the benefit of the Roxy Orchestra Relief Fund. The card is autographed "To Georgie" and signed by Rapee in a

very strident hand, the same hand which composed the lovely "Char-maine" and "Diane."

Another scrapbook item is an ad which promoted the appearance of Alexander Schreiner, who was billed as the "featured organist" at Salt Lake City's Capitol Theatre, and "concert organist" at the Mormon Tabernacle there. Dr. C.A.J. Parmentier was the Roxy chief organist and Epstein assistant organist, alternating at the rotunda and auditorium instruments.

During his tenure at the Roxy, Mr. Epstein frequently made guest appearances at other theatres. In February 1932, *Motion Picture Herald* described his appearance at the Bay-side West's Victory Theatre:

"George Epstein, with the able assistance of Mr. Fred Weiler, manager of the house and a former organist, presented an unusual organ-piano duet this past week. *Eppy*, as he is popularly known in the neighborhood, is in the habit of offering community songfests. To many in the audience, the idea of Eppy and Mr. Weiler being accomplished pianists, comes as a distinct surprise. Their concert opened with a piano duet of "Poet and Peasant," beautifully played and very well received.

"Mr. Weiler further surprised them by playing, on the organ, "Intermezzo" from *Cavalleria Rusticana* as Mr. Epstein accompanied at

the grand piano. Very good applause greeted them at the finish of this exciting presentation."

When the Victory Theatre celebrated its first anniversary, "a special stage show was presented which included three solos, played by George Epstein of the Roxy Theatre, after which, prizes were awarded to members of the audience."

Mr. Epstein also served as president of the Victory-Eppy Birthday Club, and each member was saluted at a party in the theatre when his birthday was observed. The celebrant was notified by a fancy card, signed by "Eppy." Going to the theatre was fun in those days!

Ads urged the public to "come in every day to join our songfest with Eppy and give the blues the gate." The organ was a 3-manual Skinner, and the organists, besides Epstein, were Fred Weiler and Miss N.M. Jay.

When he was featured at the Flushing (N.Y.) Theatre, the reviewer stated: "Mr. Epstein played his first show Monday and was greeted with great applause. Mr. Epstein has a knack which is brought out by his wonderful art of utilizing organ effects almost unheard of, but altogether very natural. His renditions are sweet and inspiring and his distinct playing adds great luster to the occasion."

In April 1932, Mr. Epstein was featured for a week at the Beacon Theatre's Wurlitzer. He was billed as "Eppy at the Organ," and played selections from the Victor Herbert repertoire.

When the Hammond electronic came on the scene in 1935, John Hammond demonstrated the instrument. (He was not related to the electronic's inventor). Through John, George Epstein was given a "second start in show business." He became affiliated with the Broadway legitimate theatre.

The shows with which he was connected were:

- 1935 — *Jumbo* with Paul Whiteman.
- 1937 — *Julius Caesar* with Orson Welles and the Mercury Theatre cast. George was musical director of this organization, the same group which scared many Americans the evening of October 30, 1938 when the 23-year-old Welles presented H.G. Welles' *War of the Worlds*.

Prior to his retirement, George Epstein demonstrated and toured for the Thomas Organ Co. He is pictured here at a Thomas theatre organ. (Epstein Coll.)



- 1938 — Shakespeare Repertoire with Maurice Evans. Epstein served as musical director.
- 1939 — *Knickerbocker Holiday* with Walter Huston.
- 1940 — *Charley's Aunt*, revival with Jose Ferrer.
- 1941 — *Lady in the Dark* with Gertrude Lawrence. A coast-to-coast show, in which Epstein served as accompanist for the star.
- 1944 — *Cyrano DeBergerac* with Jose Ferrer.
- 1945 — *Glass Menagerie*. Served as musical director.

For a period of several years following World War II, Mr. Epstein had a trio, working hotels and clubs until about 1955, when he began selling electronic organs. First he managed a Hammond showroom in Brooklyn, then worked for Thomas for 11 years, demonstrating and touring, until he retired. □

DINNY'S COLYUM

as
transcribed
by
Del Castillo



I gotta thank Mr. Costello for givin me the jack to go to the Convenshun. Was that sumpin. I thought L.A. was quite a town, but that Chicago is somethin else. They got skyscrapers that really is Skyscrapers. They got two of them that must be a couple miles high. You walk in the front door in the rain, and when you get out at the top you got sunshine with the clouds down below. And bein down below is like bein in the Grand Canyon. The people is scurryin around like ants, and another difference with L.A. is they dont wait for red lites. If we did like that to home, we'd get a \$10 ticket and I aint kiddin.

And them theayters with the big organs takes me way back to the 20s when I use to go to the big theayters

with the big orchestras and the big organs and the big stage shows. Everythin big. Nowadays things is different. We was to so many organ concerts all week that I got organ music comin out of my ears instead of goin in. They should of called it From Fifteen to Fifty on acct. they started off with a 15 year old young feller kid on Tuesday PM. and wound up six days later with Mr. Geo. Rite who is maybe the best known organ player that most people know about. And in between they was all kinds and sizes from the Stadium that they can get 20,000 people into and they is so much ekko that the organ music meets itself coming back, down to the WGN TV studio that only got room for 100 so Mr. Melcher had to do his stuff three times while they hustled people in and out like they was in a subway jam. Bein a old ely-vator man myself I got a kick out of the theayters where the organs was on a elyvator. Of course the organ players they aint really elyvator men, and I was kinda (sic!) humiliated at the Chicago Theayter where the elyvator went up and down so slow you wasnt sure whether it was movin at all. I felt kinda sorry for Mr. Muri who played a hole peace and when he finished the elyvator still wasnt all the way up, and when he finished his last peace the elyvator went down so slow people thought he was all done before he started in on Mr. Jesse Crawford's theme song The Forgotten Melody. Of course when the organs was in skatin rinks the only trouble was they was so loud they needed to have people skatin so you didnt get deaf lissenin, and I would of like to get a skate on myself about then.

Of course we was took everywhere on busses, and we musta gone over 500 miles to say the least. Get up early for a quick cup of coffee, onto a bus, joggle along, off the bus, into a concert, out and onto a bus, joggle into another concert, onto the bus and like that all day. I was joggled on busses so much I got saddle sores. If I had been a girl I would of been bussed to death. And them bus drivers move them big busses around like they was kiddy cars. They squeezed past cars so close I just shut my eyes and scrinched, but they always made it. You would think they always knew where they was goin, but you would of thunk rong. Every time

we had a long way to go, some bus would get lost and then we all had to wait for them to back track, one bus went too far for over 30 miles and wound up in another state. State of Confushun I guess. But they was all nice fellers and they was doin the best they could.

The worst day was on Thursday which I called a Bad Day at Black Rock. Nobody got strung up like in the picture but everythin else happened. First off we got woke up to thunder and litenin and dont you think that in them walls that go around the Palmer House you didnt think you was in a artillery barradge in the World War. So then it started in to rain and the first stop that day was to the theayter in Juliette where the rain had got into the theayter and I sure felt sorry for Mr. Don Baker where all the lites go out on the organ and he has to play with two fellers holdin flashlites for him to see by and when they finally come on the audience gives them a big hand but Mr. Bakers troubles aint over they is somethin rong and he winds up givin the concert on the Posthorn and the Bells to cover up the stuff that aint workin, and he is so mad he takes off after the con-

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