

An Evening With Edna Sellers

PART I

Transcribed and Edited by Lloyd E. Klos

During the 1969 ATOS Convention in Chicago, a surprise guest was presented to the audience at Mundelein Seminary, former theatre organist, Edna Sellers. This gracious lady was married to another theatre organist, Preston Sellers, and when the latter was installed in the Theatre Organists Hall of Fame in 1976, the writer felt that the Sellers family was an excellent subject for a feature story in THEATRE ORGAN.

When Edna performed in the twenties, this publicity photo showed an appearance which was in trend with the times. (Sellers Coll.)

Thanks to CATOE executive Russell B. Joseph and his wife, Florence, Mrs. Sellers spent several hours during a visit to their home in late 1976, talking over the great days of the theatre organ as they affected her family. Through electronic gadgetry, this conversation was recorded, and following is the edited transcript of the highly interesting session.

RJ. — Well, Edna, here we are with a warm fire on the hearth during a typical chilly autumn evening. First of all, we'd like to know where the Sellers family started.

ES. — I was born in a small town in Iowa and had my early education there. When the family moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, I finished high school and worked in a small theatre there, playing silent pictures on a piano. I was 17 or 18 then.

RJ. — Were your parents musically inclined?

ES. — My father played the violin and was an "ear" player; mother sang in a church choir. Neither was trained. I don't really know where I got my love of music. They knew I had an interest for it when I was two.

FJ. — Was there an opportunity to take music lessons?

ES. — Just from small-town teachers. I was about 10 when the first one to whom my father took me said, "Mr. Smith, why didn't you bring

this child to me sooner? I should have had this little girl a long time ago."

FJ. — Well, ten is a bit late to start study.

ES. — Yes, but I could read music and play by ear. However, that isn't the answer. Kids need training early. My primary instruction was on piano. Then our local church organist began teaching me the rudiments of basic church organ. Several months later, she retired and turned her job over to me. I believe I was 12 then.

After I was graduated from Lincoln High School, I went home for the winter in Manilla, Iowa, and in the spring left for Chicago and more music study. The job picture was better in the big city, too. I stayed with friends in Lombard, until I got a job in the Wurlitzer store. A talented violinist with whom I attended high school, lived in Chicago on the South Side. I looked her up and moved in with her while I was at Wurlitzer's.

FJ. — What did you do at the store?

ES. — I sold records. I had walked down Wabash Avenue, saw the store, went in, and talked to someone who told me to "go up and see Mr. Noble; he may have something in records." He did, and gave me the job.

FJ. — But, you weren't displaying your talent by selling records.



ES. — No, but I had to get a start some way.

FJ. — You found out about the Wurlitzer organ there?

ES. — Yes, It was at the wholesale division, about two or three blocks away. I went down there, made arrangements to practice on it and secured a teacher.

RJ. — Wasn't that organ a demonstrator?

ES. — Yes, and it was a theatre-type instrument. This was in the late teens, and shortly after, I got a job in the small Boston Theatre on Clark Street, near the Planter's Hotel. They had Harding's corned beef and we used to eat in there.

RJ. — There was no organ in the Boston, was there?

ES. — Oh, yes. It was a lovely little organ which had a stop I never found on any other instrument — a Gemshorn.

RJ. — It must have been a church-type organ.

ES. — Yes, but I don't recall the make. I worked there for awhile, alternating on the organ for pictures, the piano for newsreels, then back to the organ for the feature.

My second job was the following summer in Orchestra Hall. Mildred Fitzpatrick, a fine organist and teacher, got me the job, and carried me along as her substitute or second shift. Orchestra Hall ran silent pictures and employed an orchestra. The organ, though, was a klunker.

RJ. — That was the original organ, a 4-manual Lyon & Healy.

ES. — Yes, it was.

RJ. — How did you meet Preston?

ES. — While living with my violinist friend, we'd invite other musicians in and have musical sessions, doing both classics and popular. She was playing in an all-girl orchestra at an old Ascher house, the Oakland Square, which was around the corner. It had a small, but very pretty Kimball. Knowing the manager who always passed me in, I went in one night. Hearing the organ, I said to him, "You've a new organist." He said, "Yes, and isn't he great?" He told me to go backstage and have one of the girls introduce me to him. That's how I met Pres. I thought he

was the finest organist I had ever heard.

FJ. — Was he just starting out, too?

ES. — He had been transferred from another Ascher house. He was born in St. Louis in 1894, and had also come to Chicago in his early years.

FJ. — What was his musical education?

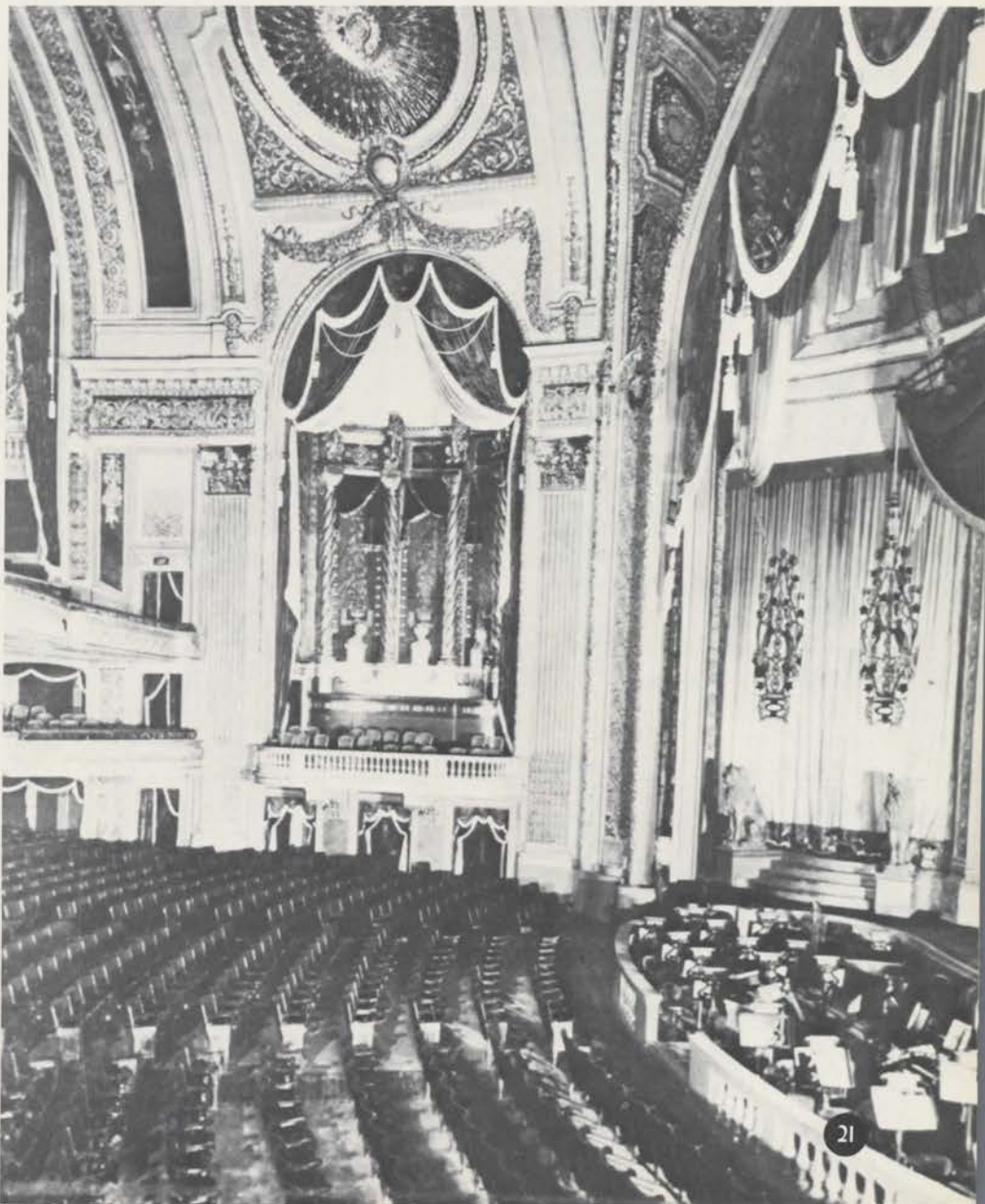
ES. — Private teachers. Pres had exhibited a talent for music, but his parents were adamant that their son was not to go into any kind of music endeavor. This was about 1904 and it was considered "sissified" for a boy to be interested in any such thing. However, his older sister respected his desires, bought him his first piano, and paid for his first lessons, if not all of them.

RJ. — Did he play in any theatres or churches in St. Louis?

ES. — No, but an amusing sidelight concerns his being approached when he was about 15 to play a private party. He accepted eagerly for spending money, and only later that evening realized that the "party" was in a large home, with many female inhabitants who frequently took male guests upstairs. He was playing piano in the parlor, and didn't realize until later where he was! His parents found out, much to their horror, and of course, this further strengthened their feelings about musicians.

I believe Pres started playing organ when he arrived in Chicago, at a little old theatre on Chicago Avenue, the Hub. The owner-manager was crazy about him. Pres was largely

Chicago's Tivoli Theatre looked like this when Preston Sellers played there. Console of the 3/15 Wurlitzer is shown at the right on the orchestra lift. The organ had beautiful Tibias, according to Edna Sellers.



self-taught as an organist, but he was so natural at it. He had all basics; there was never anything missing in his work.

I used to sub for him; he'd want some afternoons free. That's when I started to get my basic theatre experience and it worked out very well.

RJ. — In the meantime, he had changed jobs?

ES. — Yes, he went to the Chateau, another Ascher house on the North Side. I moved to the area, being a block away from the Chateau. I'd go in there and go ga-ga at Pres while he played. After my Orchestra Hall stint that summer, we got married. I believe he next went to the Covent Garden, while I followed him into the Chateau.

RJ. — Were the organs in those houses good-sized instruments?

ES. — The one in the Chateau was a beautiful little Kimball, and the one in the Covent was a great big 4-manual Wurlitzer with an echo in the rear of the balcony. What tone! It was just lovely. Pres then left the Covent for the Pantheon on N. Sheridan, and I followed him into the Covent.

RJ. — He paved the way and you followed!

ES. — Yes. That's the way people helped each other. I was very fortunate to have known him in the early years of my career, because he gave me tips and advice.

RJ. — His name as a musician was made before yours?

ES. — Oh, yes. He was well known and had good jobs, too.

RJ. — Was the Covent his stepping stone into the large loop houses?

ES. — Yes, I believe it was. But we had a musicians' strike at that time, and there were two theatre chains with which he was dickering. One would state a salary, the other would raise it, back and forth. This landed him at the Pantheon and from there, they put him into the Senate on W. Madison St. I followed him into the Pantheon and then into the Senate. This was just before our son was born. I wasn't doing solos then, just accompanying the pictures. When talkies came, we went into solo work.

RJ. — And you played for vaudeville?

ES. — Oh, yes. I was at the Senate and saw the beginning of stage bands in the middle twenties. The house had a 3-manual Kimball. Preston was so happy with the installation at the Covent, but dissatisfied with the Senate organ's sound. He went to B & K and got permission to take certain ranks from the Covent and install them in the Senate. Organ maintenance man Ken Simpson was a great help in this endeavor. I'm sure some of the brass such as the Tuba Mirabilis was transferred, and they probably enhanced the Tibia, Diaphones, Kinura and the pizzicato. When the work was finished, Pres had a completely balanced instrument and one of the finer sounding organs in the city.

RJ. — After the Senate, where did you and Preston go next?

ES. — He went into the Oriental shortly after it opened in 1926. Henri A. Keates was there, and when he was sent elsewhere, Pres went in. Balaban & Katz had taken over Paramount-Publix by then, and John Balaban had heard Pres at the Senate. He went downtown and said, "Listen, Preston Sellers has *got* to come downtown. We *have* to have him there." That's how he got the Oriental job.

RJ. — You followed him into the Oriental?

ES. — Yes, but first, we did a stint at the Marbro in 1930. However, our daughter was on the way, and Pres and I were scheduled to do a double at the Chicago. Jesse and Helen Crawford had been doing their act on twin consoles there. One of the B & K executives came in to observe the show one night. As I finished my solo, and pivoted around on the Howard seat to take my bows, he observed that I was "great with child" and immediately told the manager to give me maternity leave.

We went to B & K and told them we wouldn't be able to do our presentation until after the birth. *Variety* found this out and inserted a cute little squib: "Due to an act of God, Preston and Edna Sellers will not be opening at the Chicago Theatre until it's over." In the meantime, the stage band was released at the Marbro and they had to fill with an act. So, after Barbara's birth, our double was booked into the Marbro

instead of the Chicago.

RJ. — By then, one of the consoles in the Chicago was gone, I believe.

ES. — Yes, one of them was moved to the Marbro and organ installers hooked it up. This was the first time Preston and I did a double, and it was a big thrill for both of us. That instrument was truly beautiful!

RJ. — Did you ever play the Paradise Theatre?

ES. — Yes.

RJ. — The instrument in the Paradise was the same size as the one in the Marbro. How did they compare in sound? I understand the Paradise was not as good as the Marbro.

ES. — No, because of the placement of the chambers in the Paradise. The instrument itself was good, but you couldn't get out of it what you could get with the one at the Marbro.

RJ. — I take it that you both had the opportunity to play overtures etc. with the orchestra.

ES. — Oh, yes.

RJ. — Were you paid by the week or month?

ES. — By the week. But you had to work awfully hard. It was a seven-day week with no days off. And it was a pretty full day as they opened at 9 a.m. To prepare a solo, you had to practice after the last show was

Edna enjoyed her theatre days as she had the opportunity to meet the great stars. Among them were the noted team of Bebe Daniels and Ben Lyon, seen in this photo, autographed for Edna and Preston. (Sellers Coll.)





A glamour shot of Edna, taken in the thirties.



(Sellers Coll.) A publicity photo of Preston Sellers, taken in April 1932.

(Klos Coll.)

over, or early in the morning before the orchestra rehearsed. It was usually on Fridays, a real tiring day.

FJ. — You didn't have much leisure time.

ES. — We didn't have any.

RJ. — You had to have a sub to give you relief periods in a 15-hour day though.

ES. — We had second shifts. A lot of organists worked these. The main one was on the solo shift, and the other was filling in between. I did some of that work, too.

RJ. — Did you ever play the McVickers Theatre?

ES. — I never played there.

RJ. — What other loop theatres did you get into?

ES. — I was in the Chicago one summer. Basel Cristol was playing there,

and during her trip to Europe, I subbed for her.

RJ. — Did Preston play the Chicago?

ES. — Yes.

RJ. — Were there any other loop theatres either of you played?

ES. — The State-Lake, but that was later. They had a small instrument, not beautiful, which was incompatible with the theatre. (That organ was later installed in the Avenue Theatre in San Francisco).

FJ. — Were there times when you and Preston were separated?

ES. — We had some. From 1937 to 1943, I was at the Chicago Arena which was a winter operation for ice-skating and hockey. One summer, they put on an ice show, and the ice melted very fast! No air-conditioning then. The Arena had a 4-manual

Wurlitzer which was difficult to play. The action was very slow, and because of the size of the structure, the sound went to the other end of the building and came back. Also, the organ loft was glass-enclosed.

RJ. — You got into broadcasting about this time?

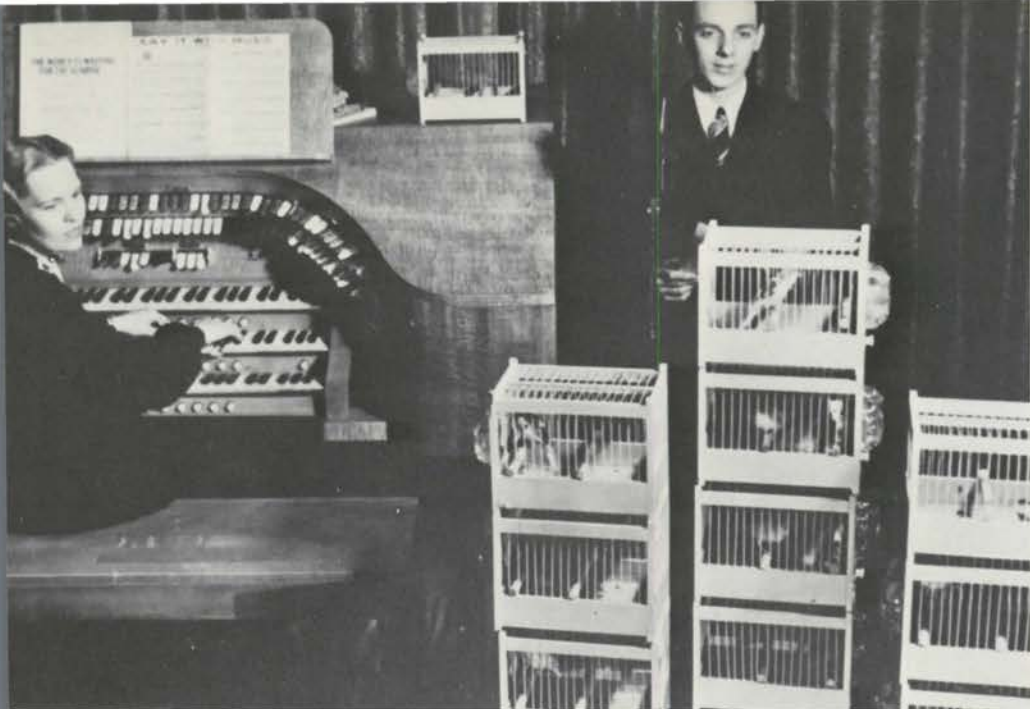
ES. — I went to WGN in 1936. Studios were in the Tribune Tower.

FJ. — What did you play for radio?

ES. — Some soap operas, solo programs and some accounts.

RJ. — Do you remember specific programs?

ES. — I did a stint for Libby when it was booked thru an agency. I doubled between WGN and the Arena after I was given permission. Then, I went to work in a Green Bay, Wis. lounge for a time. I lived there but



In early 1936, Edna played for the Sunday morning program, *The American Warblers*, which featured singing canaries on WGN. Announcer was Dick Lawrence. Preston played the show later. (Sellers Coll.)

had good help to oversee the children. Pres was working in Chicago. He did a long stint at WGN also.

His most renowned work was a network show over WGN, playing for canaries on Sunday mornings. It was the *American Warblers* and was known thruout the country. I did the first work with the canaries in 1936.

In the summer of 1937, something very bittersweet happened which I will never forget. I had programmed a show as a salute to George Gershwin. An hour or so before air time, came the terrible news that Gershwin had died in California. I debated: Should I play it or not? With a terribly heavy heart, I did and it was well received. I had an eerie feeling that day. Gershwin was one of our giant composers, straddling both classical and popular.

FJ. — Did Preston ever take out-of-town jobs?

ES. — Once in awhile he did.

RJ. — That WGN organ is a hybrid of the Wurlitzer once in the Drake Hotel and the Kimball in the Tribune Tower. Then they moved it to their new studios on Bradley Place. Did you ever play it there?

ES. — No. I've been invited but have never gone.

RJ. — CATOE was recently given the privilege of taking care of that organ.

ES. — That's good. I'm glad to hear that.

RJ. — Aside from your radio work in Chicago, where else did you play over the air?

ES. — I had a stint at Oklahoma City's WKY 4-manual Kilgen in 1944. It had a marvelous Posthorn which I accidentally struck during a radio show. After that, I ended up padding it so this wouldn't happen again!

RJ. — Was there any other non-theatre work you did?

ES. — Yes, I did some work at NBC.

RJ. — Was that WENR in the Civic Opera Building?

ES. — No, it was at the Merchandise Mart. Worked at WBBM, too, and did a long stint with Franklin McCormick and his poetry readings. Also worked with Milton Charles there. That was nice — a very nice job. Good people, fun, real lovely people. Occasionally I played at WENR.

RJ. — What was Preston doing all this time?

ES. — He was at the Oriental, primarily. After that, he went to WGN. Following the Oklahoma stint, I went into the Oriental for almost three years.

FJ. — That was for solo work?

ES. — Yes, matinee and evening every day.

RJ. — What did organists do between solo spots?

ES. — They'd rest or go over the next week's solos.

RJ. — You had only about 2½ hours between spots which wasn't long enough to do anything away from the theatre, yet too much time to sit around, doing nothing.

ES. — Well, I didn't sit around! Barbara, then 14, was studying with a fine piano professor, Mr. Wells, in the Fine Arts Building, and doing very well. For a long time, I had wanted to study advanced piano, but had been too busy. She urged me to sit in during a lesson and meet Mr. Wells. Between shows one day, I did. Much impressed, I started taking lessons with him. There were a couple good upright pianos in the theatre and I had one moved into my dressing room. Five hours a day I devoted to practice which got my hands back in shape, delving into the literature I hadn't studied before: Brahms, a lot of Bach, and Chopin. That's where I got into a deeper appreciation of the classics with orchestration etc. Mr. Wells was so wonderful as a teacher.

Oh, before the piano-study period, we had a stint when we drove to the South Side and took organ lessons from Arthur Dunham. He was at Sinai Temple and later moved to the Methodist Temple downtown, playing a big Skinner there. It was such a pleasure to attend his 30-minute noontime recitals.

FJ. — What part of your musical life was the most enjoyable?

ES. — I liked my radio work very well, but I enjoyed the Oriental more because I worked with big bands there. The organ was so beautiful.

RJ. — It is interesting, Edna, that the Oriental organ today (Dec. 1976), while not in top mechanical condition, is considered by many organists on the circuit to be one of the most exciting organs they have played.

ES. — I've believed that all along.

RJ. — I had several contacts with prospective artists for our 1977 ATOS Convention in Chicago, and the first thing they asked was, "Where will I be playing? The Oriental, I hope!" This Publix No. 1 (with Posthorn), is especially responsive and brilliant, due to shallow chambers, and no ornamental plaster screens or heavy drapes to impede the egress of sound. The organ (20 ranks) is not as big as the one in the

Chicago (29 ranks), but it has a sound all its own.

ES. — I do agree with that!

(Prior to the 1977 ATOS Convention in Chicago, CATOE workers did the most thorough restoration job the Oriental organ ever had.)

FJ. — Were there times when you wondered where the next job would be?

ES. — No, I didn't worry. In those days, they rotated us. One week, I'd be at the Tivoli; the next week, the Marbro; then on to the Granada. It was after talking pictures arrived that things started to slow down.

RJ. — Did you play the Avalon?

ES. — I played the Avalon Wurlitzer one week. The manager was Harry Beaumont.

RJ. — Ever play the Uptown Wurlitzer?

ES. — Oh, yes.

RJ. — It was a sin that the organ was taken out, and it is now up for sale. Jesse Crawford liked certain ranks on it and he moved its Tuba Mirabilis and an English Horn to the Chicago, adding to its majestic sound.

How many other theatres did you play?

ES. — I don't believe I missed any with the possible exception of competing houses, mostly on the South Side. They were all B & K theatres. I played the Norshore on Howard Street and the Tower on 63rd.

FJ. — How about the Harding?

ES. — No, I never played the Harding, and I was always glad I didn't because I never liked the instrument. B & K had an organist there, however, who had a long tenure and a marvelous following, Eddie Meikel.

RJ. — One thing people today find difficult to understand is that many organists had followings, as you said. People would relate to how an organist accompanied a silent picture. I can remember many a time hearing people say: "I'll wait for that picture until it comes to the . . . theatre because I want to hear . . . play it. That organist really makes the picture come alive."

ES. — It is very satisfying to remember the following we had. Pres and I had wonderful, loyal people. We surely did!

FJ. — When the movies were advertised in the papers, did they list who were playing them?

ES. — Oh, yes. "Edna Sellers At the Organ" . . . "Preston Sellers At the Organ."

RJ. — They were always on the Marquee, too.

ES. — That's right.

RJ. — What we'd like to hear about are some of the unusual and interesting incidents which took place during the Prestons' time in the theatres, such as when you had your children.

ES. — I don't believe it was all so eventful. I did bring the kids to the theatre and they often sat on the bench with me. I had Buddy at the Oriental one day, and one of the performers brought him out onto the stage. Two or three times this happened.

FJ. — That wasn't the easiest thing for you to bring up two children.

ES. — It was difficult, but I was fortunate to have good nurses and housekeepers, so the children were well cared for.

RJ. — Barbara got her first exposure to music by hearing you in the theatre, didn't she?

ES. — Both did. Barbara did some of her practicing after school in my dressing room. Both came for the stage shows, and talked with the stars. Duke Ellington appeared many times, and I remember a Sunday when we did seven shows at the Oriental. One day, I was practicing the piano which could be heard down the stairwell. I heard footsteps outside, and when the scuffling continued, I opened the door, and there was the Duke! I said, "Oh Mr. Ellington, I hope I haven't annoyed you." He said, "Annoyed me! You know we all like good music, too and I *had* to find out where this was coming from. You just wait until my arranger gets here in a day or two. I want you to meet Billy Strayhorn." He was a Juilliard graduate, and he did all of Ellington's arrangements then. I met him and listened to him do the Rachmaninoff Concerto. I played for him, he played for me, and we had a ball!

Later on, Ellington was back, playing a nightclub on the North Side,

and Bud took me to hear him. I sent for him to come to our table, and said, "Duke, do you remember the Oriental Theatre when you came upstairs and wondered who was playing the piano?" He said, "Yes, I do remember very well. My trombone player still remembers you, because he used to listen to you, too." That was nice.

RJ. — Were there any other stars with whom you had interesting experiences?

ES. — I had one complimentary experience involving the fellow who wore a top hat, carried a cane, played a clarinet, and was famous for the song, "When My Baby Smiles At Me."

RJ. — Ted Lewis.

ES. — Yes! He and his band were there a week. One day, I went in and picked up the band as the curtains closed at their finish. Lewis came over to the edge of the stage, looked down at me and said, "Now that little lady — let's give her a hand! She came in and played with our band on the last number." That was wonderful. Nobody ever did that to me before.

RJ. — I always thought it was pretty marvelous when the organist picked up the last few measures of the orchestra's presentation and effected the transition from stage show to movie. There weren't too many organists who could do it properly.

ES. — The temptation just got the better of me. I just *had* to play along! Another time, we had a movie with Walter Pidgeon and Jane Powell. A sweet, young thing, Jane played his daughter and sang like a doll. Her last number was Schubert's "Ave Maria." The organ was so beautiful, and the idea of playing along with this gorgeous voice occurred to me, so I did it. The manager came down and asked, "Who told you to do that?" I said, "Nobody told me; I just did it." He replied, "You keep it in for the duration of the movie." I got a kick out of it and it enhanced the end of the picture.

RJ. — Those are the things we like to read about in THEATRE ORGAN. We read about the routine things, but the anecdotes make a narrative come alive.

(CONTINUED NEXT ISSUE)