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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 Unless it's stated clearly on the letter "not for publication," the editors feel free to reproduce it, in whole or part.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 Editor:

To my regret I have noticed the recent tendency of certain correspondents to berate your recording reviewers and to denigrate Jesse Crawford. While it is not my desire to start (much less continue) any battle in print over these matters, I feel that I have valid personal reasons for speaking out against these injustices.

I have had numerous recordings reviewed in the organ and hi-fi journals within the past several decades. I have found the critics in those publications to be most fair and knowledgeable, generally speaking. If anything, they are occasionally inclined to overestimate the worth of many of the albums reviewed—some of my own included. A critic cannot be blamed for being offended when certain artists all but instruct him in how they wish their efforts to be reviewed.

Second, I cannot stand by idly and accept the desecration of the sacred memory of such a beautiful person and poetic musician as the late Jesse Crawford. To downgrade his musicianship is insulting to the many thousands of persons who continue to revere this beloved performer-innovator.

Jesse Crawford may be gone but he clearly is not forgotten. Wherever I go and wherever I play, young and old alike are intensely interested in the man and in his music. His song may have ended, but his memory vividly lingers on. Okay, so a certain English organist may have sold a million records in the 1940's, but Jess did it first in the 1920's commencing with "Valencia." Some younger persons of the present day have perhaps formulated their opinions of the great man from his latter day Decca recordings made in his twilight years on two pipe organs in

California — neither instrument of which I thought was completely or ideally suited to or worthy of his talents. In my opinion, the vintage Crawford recordings were made from the period of 1930 to 1933 when he had access to the then-incomparable Paramount Theatre studio organ in New York. Sure, there were a few public domain "dogs" recorded during those years, but those chestnuts were foisted upon the artist by tasteless "A. and R." men at Victor Records. When left to his own devices, Crawford was brilliant and unsurpassed in his own genre. When plagued by financial and domestic troubles in the middle and late 1930's, it seems to me to be understandable and pardonable that he occasionally may have performed in a perfunctory manner to place bread on his table. Haven't we all?

So much of today's playing — particularly in food emporia and in concert — passes for "entertainment." I find it difficult to believe that today's truly discerning musical public is content with and "entertained" by third-rate performances which are filled with total disregard for taste, tone color, tempo, technique and understanding of the intentions of the composers.

The Peter Principle applies where the shoe fits, certainly, but there *are*, thank God, other outlets for expression for music and musicians than in these special little narrow circles.

In closing, I plead that none of us be so uptight about fair criticism and so cavalierly condescending about an immortal genius until we can demonstrate talents at least equal to those so unjustly deprecated in these pages.

Most sincerely,
George Wright

Dear Mr. Klos:

Recently, I had the pleasure of visiting my other home in Wichita, Kansas where I was again privileged to share the hospitality of those who are responsible for the installation of the Mighty Wurlitzer from the New York Paramount. I thank them all again for making my trip so very special.

The concert by Reginald Foort allowed me the chance to again hear my favorite organ and to see that my Dan's work still lives on.

On October 13, my Wichita family helped me celebrate my 80th birthday with a beautiful party and many lovely gifts.

I am so thankful for all the hard work they have done with the organ, but more than ever, I appreciate the love they have shown me.

Affectionately,
Theresa Papp

Editor's Note: Mrs. Papp is the widow of famed Dan Papp, who was responsible for the maintenance of the Queen Mother of all Wurlitzers from 1926 to 1962.

Dear Mr. Thompson:

After being a member of ATOS for over five years, first through CATOE, then a charter member of LOLTOS with a cross country move and a membership with the Atlanta Chapter; I thought a letter would be appropriate to make known how one member became interested, enthused and hooked on theatre organs. For more than thirty years I did not know there was such a thing.

As a very young boy in the early 40's I am told by my parents that I attended one of the last vaudeville stage shows in Rockford, Illinois at the Palace. Surely there must have been an organ in use but I recall only some animals, a magician and a feature film.

In about 1953 I visited the Hub Roller Rink and recall Leon Berry at the console. The organ was impres-

sive but loud and I was there to skate, not listen. It was not too long after that that some theatre organ recordings were heard in mono on what must have been very poor equipment. I must say I was not impressed.

It was not until October 6, 1972 that I experienced a close encounter of the preferred kind. The Barton console rose from the pit of the Coronado with John Muri on the bench (or was it a Howard?) making an indelible impression. What a console, what an organist, even the seats were in motion from the powerful sound in that palace from the past. That old theatre suddenly had some meaning and value to me.

The people who have not yet experienced the thrill of seeing and hearing a theatre pipe organ in its original environment are missing one of the too rare treasures of life. ATOS and its chapters are working hard to insure that future generations will have some of the instruments to enjoy. Most will not be in theatres but some of the magic remains with the spectacular consoles, a hint of the original surroundings.

I have read with interest each letter to the editor appearing in THEATRE ORGAN since receiving my first issue. Many of the opinions expressed in that column I have neither shared or opposed to the extent of having a desire to add comment. The column is healthy for ATOS and is the proper place to air our views, pleasures and criticisms as well as those things which might not have a logical place elsewhere within the publication.

This past year I found the subject of most interest to me covered in a new column by Lance Johnson. I'm sure many other readers live many miles from the nearest source of technical information and welcome this addition but may not take the time to make known their appreciation. Putting and keeping those instruments in working order is a large part of what ATOS is all about.

Very truly yours,
Robert J. McKee

Gentlemen:

On the eve of the closing of the Beautiful Tennessee in Knoxville, I was very sorry to read the erroneous information about that house furnished to you by the Alabama Chap-

ter. Allow me to set the record more nearly in order.

The Tennessee's 3/14 Wurlitzer was being played for the public when I began studying with house organist Breck Camp in mid 1956. It was my understanding at that time that his teacher had played it before him. Camp remained with the theatre until late 1958. The management made a point of keeping everybody (even me) away from the organ until I opened as house organist on Saturday, April 4, 1959. I remained with the theatre until May of 1966. Several people played during a brief period after I left, and finally one Preston Spalding became house organist and remained with the house until it closed.

Yours very truly,
Stephen M. Brown

To the Editor:

This is just a thank you for the most honest review of the record that we sent to you by Alan Lowry, the *Secret Organ*. Your review was one that was an honest look at the record, and why it was made. Our hats off to you.

It is not every day that one finds an organ that hasn't already been recorded, and the Eaton's organ was one. We have found another organ in the Toronto area, and are in the process of getting the right to record it. You will receive a copy of it as soon as they are off the presses.

Again, thank you for being so honest in your review. We remain,

Sincerely,
E.P. Allen, Jr.,
Pinecroft Productions

Dear George:

The sad news of the probable closing of Radio City Music Hall and thoughts of the future of its world-famous organ moves me to write you regarding a matter I feel should concern all who are interested in the preservation of the theatre organ. I refer to what seems to be the increasing rate at which these irreplaceable instruments, after having been removed from their original locations in theatres, are being modified and re-modified for various purposes at the whims of owner after owner, some of whom may have little or no interest in preserving their original characteristics. In some cases completely unique and historically im-

portant organs have lost much of their original identity and character. In many other instances, the basic specifications have been so altered by the addition and substitution of ranks, revoicing or other changes, that it is no longer possible to identify them as Wurlitzers, Robert Mortons, or whatever.

I don't claim that all instruments produced in the so-called "Golden Age" were masterpieces that should remain forever untouched, like a Stradivarius violin. Ranks may have been skimpy or poorly selected. Voicing and regulation may have been mostly ignored. Nevertheless, each maker's work had a certain characteristic, and presumably represented his concept of how a theatre organ should be built and should sound, to the best of his ability under the press of commercial demands. Altering this concept arbitrarily in order to satisfy one's personal desire for more or different sounds, or simply for more ranks, may or may not result in an improved instrument from the standpoint of musical quality, or ability to impress the listener, or whatever was in the mind of the person or persons doing the modifying. What is almost certainly true, however, is that the identity of the original instrument has been lost. And unless extreme care is exercised in the selection and adjustment of added voices, or in the modifications done to the existing ones, the personality of the original instrument will have been lost also.

It is taken for granted that owners of antique or classic automobiles do not restore them by taking the engine from a Buick, the wheels from a Pierce-Arrow and the body from a Model T, putting them all together so the conglomeration runs and calling it "Classic Car." The result would be laughed out of every parade, if indeed it even got that far. Fortunately, perhaps, for the future of classic autos, such modifications, even if tolerated, would be difficult or impossible. Not so with theatre organs. One can all too easily add and swap ranks, throw out bass pipes and relays ("no space"), cut up mouths, open-toe-holes, etc., and call the result "Theatre Organ."

Will lovers of the theatre organ in future years find themselves searching for instruments that have *not* been subjected to the alterations I

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describe, so that they might hear and see a theatre organ of authentic design and construction? If so, we who lay claim to have saved the theatre organ will have done the future little real service.

It is particularly regrettable, I feel, when a great or historically important organ is involved in such a modification plan. The "Travelling Moller," intact for so many years, was installed in a commercial establishment and modified. Now it has, I understand, been re-sold. What will its eventual fate be? Will it still be the Moller it was? The famous New York Paramount Wurlitzer, which many claim was the greatest example of that company's product, has been saved — but now has additional ranks not on the original specification. Is this an improvement on the original instrument? Perhaps. I'm sure the present owners will express their indignation with me for suggesting that they might not have improved it. And perhaps they did. I will be first to extend to them my appreciation for saving it from the treatment that has befallen many another unsuspecting and innocent organ. What will happen to the RCMH 58-ranker? I'll leave it to your imagination.

Of course I recognize that if no one purchases the RCMH Wurlitzer, for whatever purpose, it will be junked or broken up for parts. Of course I recognize that without ATOS and other dedicated and hard-working amateurs, many or most theatre organs would not now even exist in any form. But I think that in our enthusiasm, plus the recent resurgence of a commercial use for these one-time curiosities, we may be guilty of drifting away from our original purpose, which I understand as being the restoration and

preservation of the theatre organ. In some cases, I submit our efforts may have resulted in more desecration than restoration.

I wonder if it might not be possible for the ATOS as a national organization to establish a policy regarding what we consider appropriate in the way of restoration. We can't tell the owner what he can do with his property; but we can, if we wish, evangelize and point out the precious commodity that theatre organs are, and give prizes to those owners or restorers who in our opinion have best followed our ideals. So far, I haven't heard or read that the ATOS even *has* any ideals.*(See Editors Note.) If not, it's time we got some. Furthermore, I believe we can do more than we have to encourage the preservation of large or important instruments by their re-installation, as tax-deductible gifts or other appropriate means, in municipal buildings, performing-arts centers, schools, universities and other locations where they may be heard again. I firmly believe that the pizza parlor organ has its place, and I'm glad that it has arrived as an apparently viable means of displaying our favorite kind of pipes. But the sums that are nowadays being spent on the purchase of existing large organs for these establishments could, it seems to me, go to organ makers for new instruments designed especially for the purpose. This would help them, and preserve existing instruments as they are.

This letter, if printed, will no doubt draw some readers' ire as being the means of a mossbound conservative, one who is down on progress; one step from the tracker-organ enthusiast. But nowadays adding and swapping ranks seems to be the order of the day; no one even questions its desirability. Perhaps it's time for a look at our objectives.

Sincerely,
Ben Levy

**Editor's Note: The ideals of the organization were set forth in the original by-laws and have not been changed. The article reads: The American Theatre Organ Society, is a nonprofit organization dedicated to, and organized for, the purpose of preserving the theatre organ and its music, and to further the use and understanding of this instrument through the exchange of information.*

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