

LORIN WHITNEY STUDIO

by Stu Green

If the expression hadn't been over-used, we'd herald "the end of an era." Actually it's been over two decades since Lorin Whitney built a studio building in Glendale, Calif. to house the 3/14 Robert Morton he had removed from the Redwood City (Calif.) Fox Theatre. Now he has sold it.

At the time, Whitney couldn't foresee the fabulous success he would have as a recording processor or as a studio facilities provider. Almost as soon as the then one-studio building had been completed and the organ installed in the mid '50s, Walt Disney came knocking at the door, needing studio facilities for his then

new Disneyland series of kiddie records. The organ studio was rented to Disney for several years, during which hundreds of organ-backed orchestral and vocal records were produced. The organist was usually Buddy Cole. This brought an initial prosperity to the enterprise which was invested in ever better studio and record mastering equipment.

Up to the time he opened his Glendale Studio, Lorin Whitney was known as the organist for several well known evangelists, the most familiar being Billy Graham. Lorin soon learned the value of these associations. Over the years he has made a series of taped programs of hymn tunes on the Morton which have made his name known among those who tune in evangelical radio stations across the land, and they are legion. So Lorin the organist became Lorin the successful businessman, because of his devotion to the theatre organ.

From the beginning, the Morton grew. When it was installed it had sprouted a fourth manual and more ranks, circa 24. In the years since, it has gradually grown until chamber space ran out at 34 ranks. Meanwhile, it became a Mecca for organ-

Lorin Whitney at the console of his 4/34 pride and joy.



ists and for the Los Angeles Theatre Organ Club, for which Lorin was the program director for a time.

We have mentioned Buddy Cole. Unfortunately he never recorded solos on the Whitney organ. His efforts were applied to making small orchestras sound larger, and that meant keeping the organ behind the orchestra. However, many of Buddy's famous contemporaries did record it in solo for various labels, among them Jesse Crawford, Eddie Dunstedter, Ann Leaf, Leonard McClain, Gordon Kibbee, and Don Baker, to name a few. Most left us a string of records played on the judicious mix of Morton and Wurlitzer pipework. The Wurlitzer ranks numbered seven and were selected to blend with the dominant Morton ranks.

Orchestra leader Freddie Martin's pianist, Bob Hunter, recorded the Wurlitzer twice as the fictitious "Georges Montalba," locating the organ in Nice, France, a town which never had a real theatre organ except in the records' jacket notes.

The Theatre Organ Club sponsored many concerts in the studio, during the '60s, some of the artists being Rex Koury, Bob Mitchell, Del Castillo, Chauncey Haines, Jim Melander, John Ledwon (then a teenager), Leonard McClain, Johnny Seng, Col. Harry Jenkins, Bob Gerretson and Ramona Gerhart Sutton, whose audience included Eddie Dunstedter. And Lorin Whitney honored the TOC with a memorable concert, soft pedalling the hymns in favor of pops. To improve the acoustical environment, Lorin had a room dug from the solid earth beneath the building to serve as one of the most effective echo chambers available in the west.

By the '70s the studio had become a recording center for producers of religious music, and it wasn't overlooked by rock musicians who required the support of multi-channel facilities, overdubbing and "isolation booths." The listening area in the organ studio shrunk steadily as glass partitions and permanent baffles were installed to accommodate the special needs of new generations of customers. It could no longer accommodate audiences. And additional small studios, geared to the needs of vocal groups, were added to the original building.

One record company which found the organ and studio useful in recent years was the Electric Lemon label, whose sponsors, showman Milt Larsen and El president Verne Langdon, specialize in occult and generally weirdo music and material. One result was a release starring "Erik, the Phantom of the Organ," with sepulchral music purportedly issuing from the sewers of Paris but actually featuring the minor key improvisations of Verne Langdon on the Wurlitzer-Morton. In another release, Langdon backgrounded actor John Carradine reciting the macabre poetry of Edgar Allan Poe in that expressive, stage-trained voice which has become familiar to four decades of moviegoers.

In the mid-'70s, Lorin Whitney began to think about retirement — but hated the thought of giving up the organ and the studio facility which had been instrumental in bringing him financial security. In March 1978 he found a buyer who would do it his way, the giant Music Corporation of America, that conglomerate whose range of activities includes managing film stars and owning movie studios such as Universal Pictures.

Under the conditions of the sale, which brought Lorin well over one million "greenies," he will remain as advisor for a renewable period of

four years. The Studio will continue to process tapes for record releases and studio rental will be available to all who need recording facilities. MCA wanted the studio complex especially because of the organ.

The agreement went into effect in April 1978 and Lorin and his wife will continue to live in Newport Beach, but he won't neglect to be on hand in his Glendale studio office where so many record producers depend on his many years of accumulated experience to help them turn out listenable and saleable records and tapes.

Meanwhile, in Redwood City the old Fox Theatre has gone the municipal auditorium route. Years too late, the city fathers realized the organ in their newly-hatched cultural center was gone, and they wanted it back. Someone recalled that it had been sold to a guy named Lorin Whitney back in the 50's. They traced down Whitney and wanted to buy the organ back. Of course it was out of the question. Even if MCA wasn't in the picture, the 3/14 grown to a 4/34 would not fit into the original chambers. But Lorin agreed to keep his eye open for an organ which would meet the cultural center's need.

"If this is retirement, I like it," said Lorin Whitney. □

