

50TH ANNIVERSARY

The Beautiful Tennesse

On October 1, 1978, the Tennessee Theatre, Knoxville's most famous entertainment landmark, marked its 50th anniversary. Designed by the Chicago firm of Graven & Mayger, and built by Publix Theatres at a cost of \$1,000,000, it seated 2,000 people and was advertised as "The South's Most Beautiful Theatre." Of Spanish-Moorish design, one

passes through an inner vestibule into the grand lobby, over two stories in height, 34-feet wide and extending over half a city block to the orchestra foyer. Five huge chandeliers light the ornately designed hall with its green and coral terrazzo floor, at the end of which are impressive carpeted stairways on each side leading to the balcony. Many fine pieces of antique

furniture and original oil paintings decorate the orchestra and balcony foyers, as well as the lower lounge areas.

The ceiling of the unusually wide auditorium features a large elliptical dome within a much larger one encircled by Moorish figures and griffens, silhouetted by striking cove lighting around the entire perimeter which

The auditorium of the Tennessee Theatre as it looked in October 1928.





The stage and auditorium of the Tennessee Theatre, Knoxville, from the right side of the balcony showing original curtains in 1928.

Grand Lobby of the Tennessee Theatre, looking toward the orchestra foyer.



changes color to create different moods.

Of primary interest to theatre-goers has always been the 3/14 Wurlitzer pipe organ on its own lift. The big red and gold French-style console, of Arabic design, is on the left side of the orchestra pit. The 1,125 pipes and toy counter are located in ornately framed chambers on either side of the elaborately designed and lighted proscenium arch. The well-equipped stage, with its 42 lines and three levels of dressing rooms were termed "a paradise for theatre folk." The proscenium width of 54 feet made it easily adaptable to the 50-foot CinemaScope screen installed in October, 1953.

The opening show on October 1, 1928, featured Jean Wilson at the Mighty Wurlitzer, Don Pedro and his Melody Boys Orchestra, the stage show "Joy Bells" and on the silver magnascope screen, Clara Bow in *The Fleets In*, with other Vitaphone specialties. Admission prices were only 10¢ and 40¢ for matinees and 15¢ and 60¢ for evenings.

A special section in the *Knoxville Sunday Journal* heralded the opening: "Tennessee Theatre Palace of Splendor." "Magnificent temple of amusement launches Knoxville into a new theatrical era," read one newspaper account and a bank ad congratulated Publix on "the South's 'Little Roxy' — a veritable temple of pleasure!"

Some of the famous stars and shows that appeared on the stage during the past half-century were: Van Arnhem's Minstrels in 1932; Gene Austin, Tom Mix and Tony; Nick Lucas, Dan Fitch Revue, in 1933; A.B. Marcus Revue; Ray Teal and his Floridians; Earl Carroll Vanities, in 1934; Broadway touring shows, "3 Men On A Horse," "Mary of Scotland," with Helen Hayes, Philip Merivale and Pauline Frederick; Ziegfeld Follies with Fanny Brice; and Ben Blue, in 1935. Glenn Miller and Vaughn Monroe came later with their bands, and Desi Arnez, John Payne and Donald O'Conner made personal appearances in the '40s.

Several world premieres have been held at the Tennessee, including *So This Is Love*, in 1953, with Kathryn Grayson, Walter Abel, Joan Weldon and Merv Griffen in attendance; *All The Way Home*, in 1963, with



Lyn Larsen played a benefit show sponsored by Knoxville Heritage, October 19, 1976.

Robert Preston and producer David Susskind present, and *The Fool Killer*, in 1965, with stars Tony Perkins, Henry Hull and Arnold Moss adding lustre to the occasion.

On December 14, 1966, the theatre was closed for two weeks for refurbishment and reseating. Care was taken to preserve the original beauty and design of the theatre which reopened Christmas Day.

Many famous organists have played at the Tennessee, including C. Sharpe Minor, Johnny Winters, Randy Sauls, Jimmy Beers, Lee Erwin and Lyn Larsen, but undoubtedly the organist best remembered by Knoxville is Billy Barnes, who was house organist from 1937 to 1942, and whose radio broadcasts during these years and from 1946-1950 were heard daily.

The organ was little used during the early fifties, and in 1956 Alfred Lunsford and Breck Camp cleaned up the console and restored the organ to good playing condition. One misguided soul repainted the console black and gold in 1956, but Steve Brown performed the noble task in 1961 of restoring the console to its

TENNESSEE THEATRE ORGANISTS THRU THE YEARS

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| Oct. 1 - Oct. 19, 1928 — Jean Wilson (Opening) | Oct. 15, 1937 - March, 1942 — Billy Barnes (Daily. Broadcast daily on WNOX - then WROL during most of this time; returned in 1946; played daily on WROL, 1946-1949; did special events at theatre, such as Miss Tennessee Pageant, 1949.) |
| Dec. 2, 1928 - Jan. 19, 1929 — Grace Justus | May, 1952 — Ernie Dalton |
| Feb. 11 - May 18, 1929 — Harry Waters | Summer, 1956 — Charlie Hunnicut (A.G.O. Regional Concert 6/26/57) |
| Dec. 28, 1930 - Jan. 10, 1931 — C. Sharpe Minor | 1956 - 1958 — Breck Camp |
| Jan. 18 - May 16, 1931 — Johnny Winters | April 4, 1959 - May, 1966 — Steve Brown |
| June 29 - July 9, 1931 — Johnny Winters (2nd appearance) | Fall, 1966 - Dec. 25, 1966 — Hugh Livingston |
| Dec. 23, 1933 — Billy Orr (Benefit and daily radio program also during early 30's on Tennessee organ) | 1967 - 1978 — Preston Spaulding |
| April 18 - May 1, 1934 — Johnny Winters (3rd appearance) | 1969, 1972, 1973, 1975 — Lee Erwin (Special appearance) |
| June 2 - June 15, 1934 — Randy Sauls (with Loulie Jean Norman, singer) | 1976 — Lyn Larsen (Special appearance) |
| Aug. 15 - Aug. 25, 1934 — Jimmy Beers (with Harvey Bell, singer) | 1940s — John Reese (For several special events) |
| Dec. 22, 1934 - Jan. 5, 1935 — Jimmy Beers (2nd appearance) | 1953 — Pearl Francis (For World Premiere <i>So This Is Love</i>) |
| Feb. 2 - Feb. 14, 1935 — Dick Betts | 1970s — Cecil Whitmire (Occasional substitute for P. Spaulding) |
| Sept. 2 - Oct. 14, 1935 — Randy Sauls (9-15-35 with Mary Cowerd - 2nd appearance) | 1978 - March to present; Chris McDowell, Bill Snyder, Bill Dexter, Peggy Rogers, Betty Hudson, Casey Pickle and Barbara VanEpps at various times. |
| 1936 — Jimmy Hart | |
| May 9 - July 7, 1937 — Carl Hinnant (Daily) | |



Billy Barnes at the console on June 10, 1978.

original red and gold finish. Thanks to the playing and tender loving care given the organ by Steve from 1959 to 1966, and Preston Spaulding from 1967 to 1978, the instrument still sounds as good as ever.

ABC Southeastern Theatres closed the theatre November 3, 1977, however, a new company, Tennessee Theatre Classics, reopened the theatre March 15, 1978 with gala showing of *Grand Hotel* and is continuing to show old Hollywood classics. Preston Spaulding presided at the console for reopening night. In June, the theatre brought Billy Barnes back for a week, and his always current selections included music from *Star Wars* and *Rocky*, as well as a parody to "Hello Dolly" entitled "Hello Knoxville."

In August, an American Cancer Society benefit had Dennis Morgan in person, with his old film *Shine On Harvest Moon* on the screen. Preston Spaulding was at the Mighty Wurlitzer. October 19th will be Patricia Neal Night when the star and former Knoxville will be honored, and Billy Barnes, an old friend, will be back again at the console.

Gone are the huge vertical sign and graceful marquee with the flashing sequence lights so fondly remembered by nostalgic moviegoers, but the interior grandeur of the past still remains. Views of Spanish balconies, stained glass windows and vast spaces under the huge blue dome, echoing the tones of the mighty organ, still give one the feeling of having enjoyed a "real experience!" □



OCTOBER 20, 1978

When the Organs Play at Twilight Around the World

Sit back, close your eyes, and imagine the thrilling symphony of sound as Mighty Wurlitzer pipe organs unite in a reverberating chorus of song. Not just two or three organs playing together, but dozens of magnificent instruments joining together in concert. It's an exciting idea that stimulates the senses and captivates the imagination.

And on October 20th, the idea becomes reality when Mighty Wurlitzers from around the world participate in an unusual, if not unparalleled concert. Mighty Wurlitzer Days 1978 is a musical happening like none other; the day theatre pipe organs around the world join together in song.

Last year's concert, the first such event for Mighty Wurlitzer theatre pipe organs, was a tremendous success. Here was a chance to awaken public interest in one of the most fascinating instruments ever created. Although theatre organ enthusiasts knew what a vital role pipe organs played in the glittering era of the silent screen, the public did not. It was time to create public awareness and recognize the theatre pipe or-

gan's vital role in shaping 20th century music. More than just an accompaniment to the staccato movements of silent greats, Mighty Wurlitzer pipe organs were the unspoken emotions of the screen, the multifaceted voice that could swell like pounding surf or roar with the impact of a dozen thundering trains. And last year's concert paid tribute to these giants of a bygone era.

This year is even more significant. It's a continuation of last year's concert, expanded to an international scope. Beginning at 8 p.m., October 20th, Mighty Wurlitzer pipe organs in different parts of the world will play the same arrangement at the same local time, starting at the International Date Line and moving westward for an entire 24-hour period. Continuing in last year's tradition, Mighty Wurlitzers will play "When the Organ Played at Twilight," a favorite of the legendary organist Jesse Crawford. The number was arranged by another well-known organist, John Muri, 1977 ATOS Organist of the Year.

Since the first universal Mighty Wurlitzer theatre pipe organ con-

cert was staged October 14, 1977, word has spread. Organs that were still in restoration, have been completed; organists who had prior engagements last year have kept October 20th free, and many organists or establishments housing theatre organs who were not familiar with Mighty Wurlitzer Days are now preparing to participate.

Among first-time participants in this year's concert, is Wurlitzer's own Mightiest Wurlitzer, the most complete Mighty Wurlitzer pipe organ in existence. Housed at Wurlitzer Corporate Headquarters in DeKalb, IL, the Mightiest will lend its own unique sound to this musical happening.

Be part of Mighty Wurlitzer Days this year when theatre organs around the world unite in song. Listen, and you can almost hear the powerful Tibias coming to life. It's the music that has dazzled audiences for decades, the nostalgic voices of theatre pipe organs. Be part of this event, this musical blending of past and present, designed to generate new enthusiasm for pipe organs around the world. □