

1978 Hall of Famer Honored Locally

by Stu Green



Milton in 1923 as he appeared on the sheet music of "Since You Went Away."

The evening of August 5, 1978, saw a tangible tribute to the organist selected this year for membership in the ATOS Hall of Fame, Milton Charles. While the organist had received the official letter from committee chairman Lloyd Klos, some of Charles' friends and fellow ATOSers felt that a celebration was in order. Bob and Alice Power were the sparkers. Their organ-equipped home is not far from the Charles residence in Ojai, California.

On the appointed evening a small group of friends met with Milton at the Power home for dinner. Bob Power read both the Klos letter and Milton's letter of acceptance. Then Milton was asked if he would like to play the "style 260" Rodgers organ, now vastly improved through the electronic and musical wizardry of Lee Sundstrom.

Milton Charles (center) poses with hosts Bob and Alice Power. (Stufato)



Milton said yes, he would play, but first he wanted to talk — about the people who influenced him during his theatre days. He explained that the honor of being chosen for the ATOS Hall of Fame had gotten him to thinking about the people he had known along the way, and that he wanted to share some of the history with his friends.

Luckily, Ray Hoepple had brought along a tiny tape recorder. What follows is a fusing of what Milton Charles said on that memorable night with information the writer obtained from the organist subsequently. It's a fascinating, although abbreviated account of the wonderful days when the theatre organ was new. We start in 1918.

Oliver Wallace! Of all the organists I've known, he was the greatest improviser of all time.

The Liberty Theatre, Seattle — it all started there. It had one of the first real theatre organs. In a short time Seattle was the capitol of theatre organs in those early days. That's where Wallace started.

When Jesse Crawford came to San Francisco he made a tremendous impact. He played so meticulously, and what he played was so well thought out. He had a big following there.

Another big one was Eddie Horton, a good showman. Then there was Charlie Minor — or 'C Sharpe

Minor,' as he was billed. Charlie made the most of the least musical ability, but was the best showman of the bunch.

I had a little playing job next to the Rialto in San Francisco where Minor was playing. When the newsreel was on I'd run next door to hear Charlie play it, especially the parades with drums ablaze.

I marvelled at his sounds — and he let me sit on the organ bench next to him. Great showman — played "Poet & Peasant" good — and fast.

One day, while I was playing in Stockton (Cal.), the phone rang and a voice said "This is Sid Grauman." I damn near fainted. Grauman was the West Coast's great theatre magnate.

Sid said "we'd like you to come down to L.A., to the Million Dollar Theatre. We'll pay you \$85 a week." I was shaking but I accepted. Sid said "When you get there tell them you're the boy from the Owl Drug Store. They'll understand."

When I got to the Million Dollar, Charlie Minor was the head organist since Jesse had moved to the California Theatre. The Million Dollar had a 3/17 Wurlitzer, one of the really big ones in the early '20s.

I soon learned the routine. 'C Sharpe' or I played a concert at 11:00 a.m. Then he'd disappear so I played from before noon straight through to 12:00 midnight — and

they brought me sandwiches from the Owl Drug Store. Then I saw the whole Owl picture — but that wasn't all.

After a 10-hour stint playing silent movies I'd crawl home. Then Sid Grauman would sometimes phone me and say he had some friends from New York, and would I come back to the theatre and play for them.

I was young then, and I'd run all the way back to the theatre. I loved it all. I recall being called back by Sid to play for the famous actor, Carter de Haven, vaudevillian Jack Coogan (sometimes accompanied by little Jackie) and Charlie Chaplin. But the funniest guy in those groups was Sid Grauman. He was an absolute riot! Sometimes Gloria Swanson would sit on the organ bench and sing. She had a beautiful voice. This was in 1918 and 1919.

Those were the days the ATOS award brought back to me and I got to thinking about the people who should have got the credit — but often didn't. I don't often get sentimental about such things. We've got to acknowledge that Crawford was a tremendous influence, but I must give credit to the big guy — Oliver Wallace.

Ollie was finally lured from the North to Los Angeles to play at the Rialto on Broadway. It had a small Wurlitzer, about seven ranks, and I'll never forget the night he played for us. Jesse had told me about him, but the first time I heard him on that Rialto organ, it was a revelation. How he could extemporize on a theme!

Only a few years later Walt Disney heard him and was impressed by his talent for improvisation. Walt hired him to score movies and that was the end of Ollie's organ career. He spent the rest of his life writing and conducting for Disney.

He used to visit me while I was playing at the King's Arms restaurant in Toluca Lake. We would reminisce about the old days. Then the customers would start coming in with their often vacuous requests and Ollie would look at me and shake his head in disbelief. But back to the early days.

Once, I heard about a fabulous organist playing at the Liberty Theatre in San Jose and I decided to



Send your change of address to . . .

VI THOMPSON
THEATRE ORGAN
P.O. BOX 1314
SALINAS, CALIFORNIA 93902

visit him. When I went into the theatre, and it was early in the morning, the movie was running and the organist was playing the score of the opera *La Boheme* and he played it throughout the film — a western! The morning audience was sparse and he wanted to study the Puccini score, he told me later. No one complained.

That's how I was introduced to Albert Hay Malotte. We became great friends. Everything Albert did, he did well. He played piano with precision, he was an amateur boxer and he flew his own plane. But music was his first love. I think anyone would agree that his accompaniment for "The Lord's Prayer" is one of the great musical settings.

In those early days the path followed by many organists was down the West Coast, then to engagements in Chicago and the East. Jesse Crawford was seven months ahead of me in this trek.

There was a guy named Jake Kalber who was high on the hierarchy of the Remick Music Co. in Chicago. Jake visited Los Angeles, heard Crawford and hurried back to Chicago to tell Sam Katz, of Balaban & Katz theatres, "There's a guy out in California who plays organ like you wouldn't believe."

So they lured Jesse to Chicago to play at the Tivoli until the Chicago Theatre was ready.

On Jake's second trip he heard me and told Sam, "There's a punk out there who isn't bad," so they brought me to Chicago.

Years later I played an M-2 Hammond at the King's Arms Restau-

rant. Why an M-2? Mainly because it fit under the elaborate piano bar that was already there when I arrived on the scene. I wasn't going to play that beat-up piano.

I had recently helped Roy Rogers pick out an organ as a present for his wife, Dale Evans. I was doing the music for their radio show. Roy chose the M-2. I recalled this when the King's Arms people agreed to an organ. It had to fit without major changes. I played that M-2 for 20 years — until my retirement.

At the King's Arms I soon learned that the trick of playing in a bar is in liking people. Musicianship isn't the answer. If you don't like people — forget it. A lounge organist is really a musical bartender. He becomes adept at listening to the customers' tales — but doesn't get involved in their affairs. But I sang for the customers.

I started singing in 1929 while playing at the Los Angeles Metropolitan. It had a huge Wurlitzer and there was a PA system with a microphone at the console. I tried some vocals and they seemed to go over well, so I added vocals to my act.

Next year I continued with the vocals while playing at the Philadelphia Mastbaum, which also had a large Wurlitzer. I had improved vocally, and had even more success. I guess that's about all I have to say.

I wanted to tell you about a few of the things that meant so much over the years. We all have memories of the things that influenced our lives — the breaks. What set me off was the ATOS award.

If I have made one point here, it is my tribute to Oliver Wallace. No one ever topped Ollie Wallace. He was unique.

Then Milton Charles sat down at Bob Power's vastly altered Rodgers organ and played a variety of selections for his small audience. These included such originals as the wedding march he composed for his granddaughter's wedding, "Kathy" (a tune for his daughter), "Up to Jupiter" (space music), followed by such standards as "Easy to Love," "Rose Room," "Street of Dreams" and then an improvisation which was a whole overture in itself. It was ample proof that Milton Charles retains the musical ability which earned him fame during the "Golden Years." □