



Mr. Blackpool and His Wurlitzer

BY
STANLEY R. WHITE

No cure has been found—none is being sought—for the true ORGAN ENTHUSIAST. Here is one of England's best giving his report on one of their best known and loved organists.

Walk up to almost any person in England, and enquire, "Who is Mr. Blackpool"—nine out of ten people would know the answer and reply, "Reginald Dixon." If you were in a Northern town the reply would be, "Reggie"—you would be expected to know the rest.

That is the fame enjoyed by Reginald Dixon, they call him, "Mr. Blackpool"—"The Man With The Magic Fingers"—"Mr. Tower of Blackpool"—It all points to one fact, the most famous entertainer in the great Northern seaside playground of Blackpool, which in the Summer holiday season becomes the showplace of the nation, is none other than the organist in the Tower Ballroom. But what an organist and what a ballroom!

STANLEY R. WHITE is a regularly featured member of the staff of RADIO AND TV REVIEW. His column is filled with news of organists, their current activities, and is enthusiastic in its criticism of recordings. Mr. White sees and hears much that pleases him, and he writes in a manner that passes on this happy mood.

THEATRE ORGAN is grateful for his thoughtfulness in sharing with us a glimpse into the life of one of England's great Organists.

Reginald Dixon was born in Sheffield in 1904. At school he won a Gold Medal Award for piano playing. At 14 years of age he was the organist at his local Church and a few years later was working as the musical advisor to a cinema circuit. In 1923 Reginald Dixon, then only 19, was involved in a motorcycle accident which was to cause much worry for him many years later. He continued cinema work until 1930, when he obtained the post of resident organist at the Blackpool Tower Ballroom.

The Tower Ballroom organ at that time was only a small two manual Wurlitzer pipe organ. Influenced by the necessity for him to play intricate dance rhythms in strict tempo for the ballroom dancers, Reginald Dixon soon developed a unique style of organ playing. He also introduced popular organ recitals for the pleasure of holiday visitors who did not wish to dance.

Then, as now, the recitals were supported by a large public who just love to hear Reggie tearing off the latest popular tunes.

Reginald Dixon's fame spread fast. With the sounds of the Wurlitzer organ still ringing in their ears, the holiday crowds returned home to all corners of the British Isles, vowing to return again

next year to listen and dance to the music of this sensational personality. They did return, and thirty years later are still doing so.

In 1932, the first commercial gramophone records featuring Reginald Dixon at the organ of the Tower Ballroom, Blackpool—appeared on the market. The first records were for the "Sterno" label. Later he switched to "Zonophone," followed by "Regal Zonophone"; then onto the "Rex" label, back then to "Regal Zonophone," and finally to his present label, "Columbia." One or two of his early "Sterno" discs were later re-released by the company under the name of "Roy Wilson"—but such information is the concern of the "Mel Doner—Reg Mander discography—"Theatre Organ Discs Of The World"—I haven't the space to deal with such matters here.

The small two manual Wurlitzer can still be heard, but only on the early records, for in 1934, the directors of the Blackpool Tower Company decided that Reggie needed a more ambitious instrument to match his talent. So it was that a three manual Wurlitzer organ was installed. It remains to this day.

Almost at the same time as the record people took an interest in Dixon so did the British Broadcasting Corporation, and today, Reggie can look back on hundreds of broadcasts. His regular BBC



REGINALD DIXON

series broadcast at 10 a.m. in the morning, usually on Wednesday or Thursday, has been running for years. The Summer series of programmes broadcast from Blackpool each year, and called, "Blackpool Night," always feature Reginald Dixon and his Tower Wurlitzer as the resident music maker. He also uses an electronic organ in the programme to accompany community singing. The BBC North Regional programme called, "Reginald Dixon's Half Hour," is heard by thousands of Northern listeners on Tuesday evenings. This programme is also a regular yearly series.

Reginald Dixon has been seen several times by TV viewers on the nation-wide BBC network seated at the console happily swinging out a Quickstep for the 3,000 dancers on the huge ballroom floor. The TV cameramen never can resist some close-up shots of Reggie at "full pressure"—with hands and feet flashing across the manuals and pedals at a tremendous pace. Such is the work to keep that wonderful Dixon dance tempo in perfect time and in weaving a melody pattern which has to be heard to be believed. It would be easy for anyone listening to a broadcast to imagine that a multi-recording technique had been used, but that is not and never has been so.

During the early years of World War Two, Reginald Dixon toured the country playing many theatre organs, and also recording some of them for "Regal Zonophone." He spent most of the war years in the "Royal Air Force" where he rose to the rank of Squadron Leader. Upon demob, it was back to Blackpool and the dear old Tower Ballroom, where he was at once welcomed by the Blackpool holiday-makers. And once again he commenced broadcasting and recording as a civilian.

Only a few years ago (1956)—Black-

pool bestowed upon Reginald Dixon the highest honor it can offer to anyone. He was asked to perform the ceremony of "Switching On" the famous, "Blackpool Illuminations" a display of artistry in lights (thousands of them) in various shapes and forms. These create a night-time Fantasia which can be seen almost one hundred miles away on a clear night. The giant Tower dominates the scene and looms high into the sky above the Tower buildings and the ballroom. This ceremony usually is performed by high ranking government officers or visiting diplomats from other countries. Reggie carried off his part in the ceremony with flying colours and to the cheers of his public who certainly agreed with the choice made for the honour of "Switching On." The whole ceremony was televised by the BBC. A wonderful sight!

On July 3rd, 1958, the morning papers came out with front page headlines such as—"Bid To Save 'Tower Dixon's Hand'"—Dixon told the press, "I have to have an operation, a nerve in my right elbow is affecting the hand, the result of an injury received in a motor-bike smash in my youth." Progressive stiffening of his right hand had been causing Dixon increasing anxiety for some time, and it had been evident in his playing. Dixon wanted to postpone the operation until the end of the Summer season which was in full swing at Blackpool, but doctors warned him that any delay would certainly cost him the use of his hand forever.

Two years before, at the close of 1956, his famous Wurlitzer organ, which is now valued at well over 5,000 pounds, has been in the Tower ballroom almost as long as Reggie, was seriously damaged in a terrible fire which ravaged the beautiful ballroom. It was a complete write-off for the 1957 season. At the time Dixon said, "This is quite a blow—this organ is almost my life." Now the organ, which had been completely restored by a team of experts from the Wurlitzer company, was silent once more. For the next few weeks the holiday visitors were missing the famous signature tune, "I Do Like To Be Beside The Seaside," with which Dixon opens all of his recitals. During 1957 when the Tower Ballroom was closed and being

restored after the fire—Reginald Dixon was heard at the other organs belonging to the "Blackpool Tower Company." Mostly he was featured at the fine Wurlitzer in the Empress Ballroom normally

played by Horace Finch. In 1957, Dixon recorded for Columbia, at the Wurlitzer organ of the Opera House. All of this rather upset the normal routine of the Blackpool organ scene. Dixon was playing Horace Finch's Wurlitzer, and for some time Horace had to use an electronic organ and share the spotlight with an Orchestra. Watson Holmes, organist of the Palace Ballroom which houses yet another Wurlitzer, was the only organist employed by the company who was able to continue normally.

This time it was not only the organ which was silent, for Reginald Dixon was out of action. People were worried—would the operation at the week end do the trick? Or, as was the thought at the back of thousands of minds, was this the end of Reggie's career? The week end arrived. Sunday July 6th was the date set for the doctors to try to save that hand. The week end was over and the newspaper headlines on July 7th read, "Tower Dixon 'fine' after Operation"—"Reggie's Back." A few days later Reggie was back in his rooms at the Tower, practising on a piano. Within a week or two his name appeared in the "Radio Times" billed to play his morning organ session. But it was still not certain. Would Reginald Dixon be recovered fully enough to broadcast, or would someone else take his spot?

The time rolled around to 10 a.m. on July 24th. Listeners to the BBC "Light Programme" would not know the answer until after the time signal. It was a terrible wait. I know—I was one of those listeners. And if he did play, what would he sound like? The audience in the Tower Ballroom already knew. At ten, the BBC time signal piped through its six bleeps and as the last one faded away a fresh sound took the air. The mighty Wurlitzer roared across the airwaves of the British Isles. Accompanied by a wildly cheering audience in the Tower Ballroom, the strains of, "I Do Like To Be Beside The Seaside" told us that Reggie was back! Never was he more welcome. Probably what was more important to all of us, including Reginald Dixon, was the tremendous improvement in his playing, evident from his very first selection. Here he was as good as ever.

One of the many "get well" letters received by Reginald Dixon during this period was from none other than the famous American singing personality, Bing Crosby.

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Gus Farney - 1942

While with the Air Force, Gus played outfield on the Thunderbird ball club, piano and accordion in the post dance band, and organ on a Phoenix radio station program between flight duties.

Incidentally, Gus has a broadcasting background that dates back to head set days. His original Cowboy Band group received over four hundred fan letters a day on America's first blanket coverage radio station. And his years of organ, piano, and accordion programs were heard all over the nation.

In Utah's capitol city Gus is a musical institution. He was former featured organ soloist at Salt Lake City's Capitol Theatre for three years and is presently playing his twenty-fourth year in the intermountain country's largest ball room, and his ninth season with Max Engeman's Elite Ambassador Club Combo.

Between engagements Gus currently operates his own music school, does special organ concerts for Baldwin dealers around the country, and makes civic, club, and hotel appearances.

For relaxation and to keep fit for his rugged musical schedule, Gus spends some spare time hiking in Utah's beautiful mountains. He enjoys model railroading and following sports events. Compiling eight years of data and photographic lecture materials, gathered on some 23,000 miles of tours to famous western frontier historical spots, also claims attention. Gus is an authority of note in Western Americana, and is a member of two State Historical Societies.

Gus is married, has two children and six grandchildren—"Almost enough for my own ball club," Gus chuckles. He still gives the youngsters and his friends occasional workouts with the old horse hide pellet, "Just for fun and to keep the old pump and pedal pushers in trim," says he.

DONOR RECORD REVIEW

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(Hunter-Ewing); Theme from Scherezade (Rimsky-Korsakov); Ritual Fire Dance (Falla); Polovitsian Dances (Borodin).

PANDIT, KORLA — Fantasy 32772; 8013***
Music of the Exotic East (Released December, 1958) — Procession of the Grand Mogul; Song of India; Miserlou; Harem Bells; Tale of the Under Water Worshipers; others.

SLACK, DR. P. B. — International 5071**
Hi-Fi with Peter Slack at the Console (KGER Wurlitzer, Long Beach, California)—Around the World; Tenderly; Valse Brillante; A Long, Hot Summer; Autumn Leaves; Summer-time; Arrivederci, Roma; Whiffenpoof Song; Waltz in Vienna; Lazybones; Fascination; Aura Lee; Two Guitars.

WHITNEY, LORIN — Sacred 9025**
Pipe Organ. Released December, 1958.

WRIGHT, GEORGE — Hi-Fi R-714**
Hymns That Live — Ivory Palaces; The Old Rugged Cross; Evening Hymn; Rock of Ages; Sweet Hour of Prayer; Nearer My God to Thee; A Mighty Fortress Is Our God; I Would Be True; Beautiful Isle of Somewhere; I Love to Tell the Story; Abide With Me; Softly and Tenderly; In the Garden; Onward Christian Soldiers.

Hi-Fi R-717*
Flight to Tokyo — Japanese Sandman; It Looks Like Rain in Cherry Blossom Lane; Japanese Sunser; Cherry; Poor Butterfly; Nagasaki; Rickety Rickshaw Man; China Nights; One Fine Day; Kyoto Beguine; Lady Picking Mulberries; Japansy; Japanese Can-Can.

Hi-Fi R-718*
The Roaring 20's — The Charleston; Song of the Wanderer; That's A-plenty; It Happened in Monterey; Toot Toot Tootsie; Then I'll Be Happy; You're the Cream in My Coffee; Mississippi Mud; You Do Something to Me; You Were Meant for Me; Laugh, Clown Laugh; I Wanna Be Loved by You; Just a Memory; Varsity Drag. Released April, 1959.

ALIAS MELENDY, GEORGE
Camden COL-414**
Pop Pipe Organ in Hi-Fi — Back Bay Shuffle; Stars Fell on Alabama; Falling in Love With Love; I Got Rhythm; Nochecita; I Dream Top Much; Birth of the Blues; While We're Young; Prelude No. 2; Gypsy in My Soul; You're Mine, You; Whipporwill. Released April, 1958.

ALIAS McNEILL, JOCELYN
Victor RAL-1010**
Very Hi-Fi Organ — Who's Sorry Now? Sophisticated Lady; Pavanee; Stardust; The Creole Love Call; Home; Blue Mirage; Jealous; I Got Rhythm; Emaline; Stormy Weather; The Dream of Oliven.

LANE, KENNETH — Metropolitan Theatre,
Boston, Mass.
Wurlitzer RKO-1003*
You're on My Mind; Night and Day; You're Getting to Be a Habit With Me; Once in a While; No Can Do; That's All; Thanks for the Memory; Serenata; La Comparsa; Miami Beach Rhumba; Merengue Mania; The Moon Was Yellow; Dancer in the Patio; Jalousie.

MR. BLACKPOOL

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That, then, is the story of one of the greatest entertainers who ever graced the console of a mighty Wurlitzer. And today he is still at Blackpool, giving recitals, doing broadcasts, and recording his latest series for "Columbia." This is a series of 45 rpm Extended-Play discs, usually under the titles of, "Memories of the Tower" and "Blackpool Favourites."

If you feel that you would like a personal photograph of Reginald Dixon, write to him c/o "The Blackpool Tower Company, Ltd.," Empress Buildings, Church Street, Blackpool. I am sure that you will receive his latest picture, at the Wurlitzer.

Now, I expect you would like to see the specification of Reginald Dixon's organ, so here is the information you require.

The organ was installed in 1934. With all of the fittings brought back to their original splendour, its recent complete restoration has given it new life. The care of the organ is a "must," as it is a major feature of the fabulous Blackpool entertainment scene. It is always kept in wonderful condition.

WURLITZER

Console 3 manual.
Diaphonic Diapason.
Tibia Clausa I.
Tibia Clausa II.
Concert Flute.
Violin.
Violin Celeste.
Solo String.
Orchestral Oboe.
Krumet.
Kinura.
Saxophone.
English Horn.
Harmonic Tuba.
Tuba Mirabilis.
Grand Piano.
Phantom Piano.
Unenclosed Xylophone and
Chrysoglott.
Plus the usual Wurlitzer traps and effects.

SCOTT, DICK
United Artists UAL 5058*, 4058**
Sing Along With the Mighty Wurlitzer.
SCOTT, D., SENG, J., DEWITT, DON
United Artists UAL 5059*, 4059**
A High Fidelity Introduction to the World Famous Wurlitzer Pipe Organ.