

# TOM GRIERSON

ROCHESTER'S "MR. ORGAN"

By

LLOYD E. KLOS

"Welcome to Rochester, Tom," read the ad of August 23, 1959. When the writer saw it, he literally jumped through the ceiling. For here was a link from the past returning to the city—Tom Grierson, for many years the "Mr. Organ" of Rochester—the man who presided over the 4-manual Wurlitzer at the RKO Palace Theater, in the days when the Theater Organ was king in the show-places of America.

To say that he is happy to be back to Rochester is putting it mildly. He had been away in Florida for five years, and the climate there was definitely not to his liking. The writer, in looking over faded clippings, spotted one dated June 28, 1931. In it, Tom is quoted as saying, "I'll sell Rochester to the cockeyed world!" This is the alpha and omega of a very intelligent man's thinking.

Of Scottish descent, Tom was an orphan at an early age. He was brought up as a choir-boy ward of the ancient Carlisle Cathedral in England near the Scottish border, living in a cell which had been occupied by the old monks before the Reformation. From the age of seven to seventeen, Tom absorbed the atmosphere of that Twelfth Century Cathedral, and at 14, he played hymns for a Sunday service. At 16, he was made sub-organist, being at this time under the teaching of Sydney Nicholson, who later became organist at Westminster Abbey, and Knighted by King George V. This background was responsible for Tom's love of the Anglican hymns. When he plays them for you today, he'll give you some history behind them.

While still in his minority, he hired out as a piano player for the Booth Steamship Lines, making three trips from Liverpool, England, far up the Amazon river. Later, playing piano on the North Atlantic run, he became ill and was dropped off in Brooklyn. It was at this time that the silent pictures were in vogue, and silent pictures needed accompaniment. Tom started playing organ for the silents, and went on the road. After a theater engagement in Toledo, he was driving to a prospective New York job, when he blew three tires near Rochester. He put in here for repairs, liked the town, and promptly adopted it as his own. This occurred in 1921.

Tom was named musical director of Irondequoit High School, in addition to his church and theater duties. He played organ at the Regent, a Hope-Jones 3/10 original, and the Strand, a 3/15 Marr & Colton Opus 1, and had engagements in others. But it was at the RKO Palace where "Mr. Organ" came into his own. The theater was opened in 1929, and featured a Wurlitzer 4/19. For the benefit of the reader, the ranks were tuba, flute, trumpet, diapason, quint, open diapason, 2 tibias, clarinet, oboe horn, orchestral oboe, salicional, viol; viol celeste, string, gamba, saxophone, vox humana, and kinura. The pipes are situated in 2 chambers, one on each side of the auditorium near the stage. The console was ivory, and a microphone was attached to it at the right.

The writer vividly remembers Tom's feature programs. The console situated to the left of center stage was bathed in the spotlight as the instrument rose from the pit. The powerful strains of "Hello, Hello, the RKO" filled the magnificent theater, and with the final cord, the familiar "Heigh-ho, everybody" through the P A prepared everyone for some community singing with the inevitable song slides, controlled at first from the console, later from the projection booth. Quite often, during these songfests, the organ would stop, and the audience would find itself singing unaccompanied. This would cause Tom to say, "That was magnificent!" All in the spirit of fun. After the session, the organ would slowly descend, and the audience would settle itself for the feature movie.

In the fifteen years he was featured at the RKO, Grierson made 10,000 radio programs over Station WHAM. He did morning programs before the theater opened, and the evening programs after the last show. Tom's fan mail was terrific in those days. And what did these letters contain? One expressed appreciation from Ottawa listeners who got a kick out of his very Oxford English. Others contained inevitable flapper flourishes from young and young-in-heart girls; "This hurts-me-more-than-it-hurts-you" rebukes from serious souls who found him flippant in the "wrong" place; paens of gratitude for his religious music and testimonials of souls deeply stirred; denials that women squeeze toothpaste

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Tom Grierson, playing the 4-manual Wurlitzer at the RKO Palace May 1931.



Tom Grierson, at the RKO console, 1935.



Tom Grierson plays one of the first Hammonds in Rochester, 1935.



12 Tom Grierson at the reconstructed organ of First Universalist Church

## POTOMAC VALLEY CHAPTER, A. T. O. E. MINUTES OF THE MEETING Friday, December 4th, 1959

The second regular meeting of the Potomac Valley Chapter, A. T. O. E., was held Friday evening, December 4th, 1959, at the Alexandria Arena. The meeting was called to order by Chairman Erwin Young at 11:30 P.M. with twenty-one regular members and their guests present.

The minutes of the first meeting and the current financial statement of the Chapter were read by the Secretary and Treasurer, Bob Jones.

The Chapter Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and brought the membership up to date on the events leading up to the granting of the charter to the Potomac Valley Chapter, A. T. O. E. Discussion was then held concerning the newsletters received by the Chairman from the National A. T. O. E. President, Mr. Judd Walton, with particular emphasis directed to the location of the present Chapters and the general growth of the organization. The time and place of the annual meeting of the A. T. O. E. was recorded and Mr. Young indicated his intent to be present at this meeting. The members were then brought up to date on the status of the various organs installed or being installed in our Chapter area together with known plans for future meetings to include these installations. The Chapter was informed of the radio program over Radio Station WFAX, Falls Church, Virginia, 1220 KCK every Sunday at 12:45 Noontime, featuring our Chapter Vice Chairman Jimmy Boyce at the console of the Mighty Wurlitzer located in the Alexandria Arena.

The members were then advised they would be billed for National A. T. O. E. dues for

the year 1960 after the fourth 1959 issue of Theater Organ was received, probably some time after March 1960. Local Chapter dues are good through December 31st, 1960. This arrangement was accepted by the members present. The members were briefed on the proposal from Mr. Judd Walton to have local Chapter Chairman on the Board of Directors of the A. T. O. E.

Our Chapter Chairman, Erwin Young, discussed his visit to the Delaware Valley Chapter, A. T. O. E., meeting at Surf City, New Jersey. Also discussed was the trip by Mr. Young, Vice Chairman Jimmy Boyce and member Dick Collins to Radio City Music Hall as guests of Mr. Jack Ward, Staff Organist at the Music Hall.

Dick Collins made a motion, seconded by Bob Jones and approved by the members, to express the appreciation of the Chapter to Mr. Tom Brown, Manager Alexandria Arena, for the use of his facilities for our meeting.

The following committees were appointed: Program Committee, Jimmy Boyce Chairman, Ray Jenkins and Harold Warner as members. Membership Committee, Clyde Berkebile Chairman and Harold White assisting. Refreshment Committee, Mrs. Robey Chairman, assisted by Mrs. Haney, Mrs. Cooper and Mrs. Williams.

The business meeting was ended with an expression of thanks to Mrs. Robey and Mrs. Cooper for the very tasty refreshments.

The members then adjourned individually to the console of the Mighty Wurlitzer, the strains of which were heard several blocks down St. Asaph Street until after 2:00 A.M.

ERWIN A. YOUNG, JR.,

Chairman.

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tubes as proof, all because Tom spent a split second on the radio to say that they did; detailed descriptions of small towns, after Tom had added "whatever that may be" to casual reference to a dot on the map. A local minister called Tom "the most dangerous man in Rochester. Everyone knows this dangerous man. He's one of the few who can turn his back on an audience and get away with it." That wasn't all by any means.

In greeting his RKO audiences, there were a couple cheerios in his voice, but he spoke the King's English and made "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen" sound like the start of a grand occasion. The Scottish gags had to be taken with a laugh. He still works them in this fashion today. Radio announcing was one of the things which just happened to him.

Looking back, he says, "Really, I never had announced before I started at the Palace in 1929. I always ran away from public speaking. And then the regular announcer was late one day, and it was my turn. They gave my voice Grade A. That means I could bite the mike, and the words were clear. Some voices won't carry too close to the mike, you know." That was the first step—

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## SAN FRANCISCO THEATRE ORGAN SPECTACULAR!

It was raining, the tickets cost two bucks per person, the time was set at 12:00 midnight, publicity was local (approximately 30 mile radius), but despite these apparent obstacles 4600-plus theatre organ enthusiasts assembled at the San Francisco Fox Theatre on Saturday, March 5th to hear a George Wright concert! They came from as far as Los Angeles, Oregon, Arizona and other neighboring states. Originally sponsored by a local organ enthusiast, with the financial help of the many Bay Area organ clubs (including the Northern California Chapter of ATOE), the affair was later co-sponsored by radio station KPEN-FM, of San Francisco. It was at this point that interest really began to build up on a big scale, possibly due to the publicity given by the station on the air and in the Bay Area newspapers.

Work on the organ that had been under way for weeks in anticipation of an important recording date was intensified to have the instrument as nearly perfect as possible by the concert date. It was completed just in time for one rehearsal prior to concert time!

George Wright opened his show by bringing the organ up out of the pit into the full brilliance of a bevy of pure white spots, playing Show Business. His program included Misty; a Gershwin medley of Rhapsody In Blue, Love Is Here To Stay, Crazy Rhythm, and The Man I Love; Nochechita, Mae West medley that included Frankie And Johnny, The Bowery, My Old Flame; Clare De Lune; Whistler And His Dog; Night And Day; Victor Herbert Medley; and St. Louis Blues.

He opened the second half with Pine Top Boogie and then played accompaniment to the Fox Movietone Newsreel taken at the time of the original opening of the Fox Theatre in 1929, followed by an old-time slapstick comedy which delighted everyone.

He concluded by playing When Day Is Done and acknowledged the ovation from the console as it slowly descended into the pit. Staying until the last sounds of the organ had died away into the 3:00 AM darkness were several top executives of the Fox-West Coast Theatre Co. who were re-educated, by their own admission, to the drawing power of the Contemporary Theatre Organ. Manager Bob Apple is to be commended, not only for his theatre organ enthusiasm, but for doing everything possible with lighting, etc., to make the occasion a success.

Wright's artistry was matched only by the magnificence of the instrument, a 4-36 Crawford Special Wurlitzer. The enthusiasm of the crowd was unmistakable, and the almost deafening applause was tribute indeed, not only to Wright but to the Theatre Organ itself.

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right into the heart of thousands of listeners, hundreds of them many miles outside the guaranteed "circle," thousands right here in Rochester.

There was a reason why Tom, even in his lush Theater Organ days, leaned toward religious music, and why, along with his theater and radio work, he spent each Sunday morning with a church organ. His early years enabled him to do this—a "split organ personality." For seventeen years, he was organist at First Universalist Church, seven years at Brick Presbyterian, and had a shorter stint at the Church of the Ascension.

With this background, Tom frequently received assignments to play in various parts of the country and elsewhere. In December 1931, he was selected to play the new \$60,000 organ in dedicatory services at the Basilica de Guadalupe in Mexico City. (Wurlitzer 4m Opus 2168.) This huge basilica, seating 10,000, fea-

tures, in actual fact, two organs. One is in the choir, the other 375 feet away, both controlled by one console. The choice of an organist for the first service narrowed to 5 men, including some of America's greatest. Just how Tom was selected, the clippings don't say. The schedule called for four recitals with programs running from Palestrina and Bach to the best type of modern church music.

When the news of his going reached his fans, Grierson was besieged with requests. One that he go to Yucatan and probe the merits of a certain oil well. Others asked for Mexican jumping beans and recipes for Chili Con Carne. The price one pays for popularity!

During his time at the Palace, Tom Grierson played for such vaudeville performers as Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, Morton Downey and Kate Smith—at that time, young performers on their way to fame and fortune. Features on his broadcasts included birthdays and special re-

quests for shut-ins.

When he gave up his post at the Palace, he devoted his time to his church work and teaching. In looking back, he says that theaters were becoming machines in a big mill in the middle 30's. Vaudeville was gone, and the theater organ was becoming a thing of the past. The desire for profits was another factor in motion picture houses. All "needless expense" was being eliminated.

In 1935, Laurens Hammond brought out his electronic organ. Tom had a hand in developing that instrument's popularity in Rochester. On October 1, 1935, borrowing the Hammond from Lutheran Church of the Peace, he played a recital in the Tower Restaurant of Sibley's, Rochester's largest department store. The newspapers of the day quote Tom as saying "one of the most responsive and enjoyable instruments I have ever played." According to the newspaper account of the day, "surging out in thunderous

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#### SPECIFICATIONS OF STRUNK 4 MANUAL CITY THEATRE ORGAN

In answer to the many requests, ATOE is pleased to publish specifications of this organ. Original article appeared in Vol. II, No. 3 of The Tibia. Spelling is authentic. Rene D'Rooy is still at the theatre and sends his greetings.

<b>PEDAAL</b>	<b>ACCOMPAGNEMENT</b>	Piccolo . . . . . 2'	Octaviact . . . . . 4'
Acoustikbas . . . . . 32'	Violone . . . . . 16'	Nachthorn . . . . . 2'	Octaaf . . . . . 2'
Subbas . . . . . 16'	Bourdon . . . . . 16'	Terz . . . . . 1-3/5'	Vox Humana . . . . . 16'
Zachtbas . . . . . 16'	Diapason . . . . . 8'	Majik Terz . . . . . 1-3/5'	Vox Humana . . . . . 8'
Sousaphone . . . . . 16'	Jazz Trumpet . . . . . 8'	III = IV . . . . .	Kinura . . . . . 16'
Cello . . . . . 8'	Viola . . . . . 8'	III - IV Sub . . . . .	Kinura . . . . . 8'
Open Bas . . . . . 8'	Celeste . . . . . 8'	Kloken (Chimes) . . . . .	Saxophone . . . . . 8'
Gedektbas . . . . . 8'	Krumhorn . . . . . 8'	Marimba Harp . . . . . 8' & 4'	Tremolo IV . . . . .
Trombone . . . . . 8'	Tibia . . . . . 8'	<b>SOLOORGEL II</b>	Vibrephoon (Marimba)
Octaaf Bas . . . . . 4'	Holpy . . . . . 8'	Diapason Major . . . . . 16'	Tremolo Generaal
Viol Celeste . . . . . 4'	Vox Humana . . . . . 8'	Manual IV . . . . . 16'	Tremolo Tibia
Pedaal I . . . . .	Violina . . . . . 4'	Manual IV . . . . . 4'	Tremolo Tibia
Pedaal II . . . . .	Celeste . . . . . 4'	Violin . . . . . 16'	Tremolo Vox Humana
Pedaal III . . . . .	Octaaf . . . . . 4'	Viola Orch. . . . . 8'	Solo II-Six Pistons
	Tibia . . . . . 4'	Viola de Gamba . . . . . 4'	Solo I-Eight Pistons
	Fluit Dolce . . . . . 4'	Celeste . . . . . 8'	Great 7-Eight Pistons
	Vox Humana . . . . . 4'	Celeste . . . . . 4'	Acc.-Eight Pistons
	Quint Tibia . . . . . 2 3/5'	Majik Fluit . . . . . 8'	Pistons on either side of the eight
	Nachthorn . . . . . 2'	Quint . . . . . 5 1/2'	on the great manual are,
	Harp (Marimba) . . . . . 8'	Forest Fluit . . . . . 4'	Siren
<b>HOOFDORGEL (Great)</b>	<b>SOLOORGEL I</b>	Twelfth Tibia . . . . . 2 3/5'	Whistle
Bourdon . . . . . 16'	Violon . . . . . 16'	Piccolo . . . . . 2'	Flute (train)
Fagot . . . . . 16'	Vox Humana . . . . . 16'	Nineteenth . . . . . 1-3/5'	Triangle
Trombone . . . . . 16'	Bourdon . . . . . 16'	<b>PEDAAL</b>	Drum Roll
Prestant . . . . . 8'	Tibia . . . . . 16'	Groote Trom (Big Drum)	Cymbal
Trompet . . . . . 8'	Fagot . . . . . 16'	Bekken (Cymbal)	Four Swell pedals,
Celeste . . . . . 8'	Jazz Trumpet . . . . . 16'	Roffel (Snare Drum Roll)	Echo
Tibia . . . . . 8'	Diapason . . . . . 8'	<b>ACC.</b>	Chamber I
Gamba . . . . . 8'	Tibia Clausa . . . . . 8'	Jazz Blok . . . . .	Chamber II
Clarinet . . . . . 8'	Jazz Trumpet . . . . . 8'	Castagnetten . . . . .	General
Viol D'Orch. . . . . 8'	Viola . . . . . 8'	Sleebellen . . . . .	30 Note Pedaal Board
Major Flute . . . . . 8'	Celeste . . . . . 8'	<b>2nd Touch</b>	2 main chambers on the right of
(above now Kinura)	Vox Humana . . . . . 8'	Jazz Trumpet . . . . . 8'	the theater, Echo on the left (in-
Tibia . . . . . 4'	Concert Fluit . . . . . 8'	Acc. . . . . 16'	operative)
Piston (trumpet) . . . . . 4'	Krumhorn . . . . . 8'	Acc. . . . . 4'	Voltage Meter
Quint . . . . . 2 3/5'	Viola Amour . . . . . 4'	<b>ECHO</b>	Amperage Meter
Nachthorn . . . . . 2'	Celeste . . . . . 4'	Tibia . . . . . 16'	Manuals from bottom to top are:
Terz . . . . . 1-3/5'	Prestant . . . . . 4'	Tibia . . . . . 8'	Great, Acc., Solo I, Solo II. (Yes,
Progress Harm . . . . . 5 1/2' plus 4'	Jazz Piston (sax) . . . . . 4'	Tibia . . . . . 4'	the Great Hoofdorgel) is the bot-
Harm Aether . . . . . 2 3/5' plus 2'	Tibia . . . . . 4'	Tibia . . . . . 2 3/5'	tom manual, and the Acc. is the
Scharf Regal . . . . . 1 1/2' plus 1'	Zacht Gedecht . . . . . 4'	Tibia . . . . . 2'	second manual, just the reverse
Sub Coupler . . . . .	Majik Nazard . . . . . 2 3/5'	Tibia . . . . . 1-3/5'	of our standard practice.
Super Coupler . . . . .	Nazard Fluit . . . . . 2 3/5'	Hoorn Diapason . . . . . 8'	The pedal is very weak except
I - III . . . . .			the Trombone which is a real fire
I - III Sub . . . . .			breather.
I - IV . . . . .			
I - IV Sub . . . . .			
I - IV Super . . . . .			

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waves of sound, or reduced to the merest whispering pianissimo, the organ reacted with the greatest sensitiveness to his slightest manipulations."

In 1938, Grierson purchased a 20-acre farm in the country. The 11-room, 130-year-old house is a splendid example of early American architecture. Adorned with a Grecian-pillared entrance, the house is sturdily built with thick walls of brick and clapboards. Spacious rooms, wide fireplaces, and a sweeping stairway with walnut balustrade are other features.

With the advent of the Hammond, Tom Grierson expanded his organ activities. Engagements at various public and private functions were his lot. His smooth, suave manner made him a great favorite in private homes and country clubs. The portability of the electronic instrument made it easy for him to transport it from place to place. He played during intermission at sporting events at the Edgerton Park Sports Arena. In various shows and expositions, there was Tom, with his Hammond. For several years at Christmas time, he played appropriate music at Edward's department store. In the forties, he ran a skating rink at Ontario Beach Park, furnishing the organ music for the skaters.

In May 1953, he underwent a serious operation. As a means of recuperation, he was advised to go south. Selling his beautiful home and possessions, he went to Florida where he slowly regained his health. During his Miami sojourn, he was organist and choir director in the Church of the Resurrection which started out with a handful of parishioners which grew in 5 years to a congregation of 1,000 each Sunday.

And now, the circuit is complete. Tom Grierson, "Mr. Organ" of Rochester, is back on home soil. He is supervising the piano and organ department of Music Lovers Shoppe, specializing in the new Gulbransen transistor organ. His name not forgotten, he has had several engagements around town since his return. One was in the Community War Memorial Auditorium, where he entertained 8,000 teachers at their annual meeting. His most significant appearance was at the Hollywood premier of the picture "FBI Story" at his old stamping ground, the RKO Palace. He opened a half-hour pre-movie organlude with "Hello, Hello, the RKO" just like he did 30 years ago. The organ, in spite of neglect was just as thrilling to a packed house as in the hey-day of "the mighty fertilizer."



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English Horn	Bombarde	Tom Tom
Vox Humana	Open Diapason	Castanet
Cornopean	Cornet	Tambourine
Tibia Clausa	Piccolo	Triangle
Post Horn	Fife	Maracas

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