

The Jobi Wurlitzer

Waterbury's State Theatre Wurlitzer Begins A New Career

Story by June L. Garen Photos by Preston Miller

The 1920s, the last and greatest years of the silent film era, were coming to an end when I.J. Hoffman built the State Theatre in the grand Spanish motif in 1929, the first one designed for sound in the city. Although talking pictures had already arrived when the State opened, the 2/10 Wurlitzer, Style 205, Opus 2016 was installed as an extra feature and was used mostly for musical interludes. Jimmy Colgan, a popular local artist, was the first resident organist.

At that time Waterbury was a city of approximately 85,000 and already had six other movie houses that boasted pipe organs. The Rialto contained a 5-rank Wurlitzer which is now owned by John Stokes, a Connecticut Valley Chapter member, and is still playing. Both the Strand and the Palace had Hall organs, church organs without traps or percussions. The Garden boasted a Robert Morton pit organ and a Bartola, and the Carroll contained a 2/3 Wurlitzer with the console in the balcony.

The State console was situated at the left side of the orchestra pit, and the two pipe chambers were approximately 30 feet above the stage on either side of the proscenium arch. It wasn't until 1975 that the console was moved to the center.

The State, advertised as Connecticut's finest theatre presenting the world's best talking and sound pictures, held its grand opening on Easter Saturday, March 29, 1929, with the "100% mammoth all-talking screen extravaganza," "Syncopation" starring Fred Waring's Pennsylvanians, and "The Spirit of Waterbury" featuring Al Jolson as master of ceremonies in a special



Bill Hastings at the console in its new North Truro home.

Vitaphone novelty produced for this gala opening. Also, Walter J. Seifert presented "A Trip Through the Organ." It's assumed that Mr. Seifert was a representative of the Wurlitzer Company.

In 1930, the so-recently installed instrument was just two inches away from disaster when drains on the roof became clogged, and water came pouring in, down the curtain, onto the stage and into the pit coming within just a couple of inches of the relays. To insure the safety of the organ from possible future water problems, the management had a platform built for the console.

The Wurlitzer fell into disuse in the early 1930s until 1942 when it was used for War Bond rallies, played by Robert Zoeller, husband of theatre manager Julia Smith Zoeller (Julia managed the theatre for 43 years along with Tula Vorvis). He had been a band leader and had also studied organ with Lew White around 1930 or 1931.

It was in 1944 that Everett Bassett "rediscovered" the State Wurlitzer. Ev, a charter member of the Connecticut Valley Chapter, got his first chance to play a theatre organ at the Cameo Theatre in Bristol in 1944. It was the manager of the Cameo who



1978 Program Chairman Paul Taylor, left, with new owners Joe Colliano, center, and Bill Hastings.

clued him in to the existence of the organ at the State in Waterbury. Fortunately for all concerned, Ev's interest in the instrument was welcomed, and he was given the "go ahead" to do whatever was necessary to restore the organ to top playing condition.

Ev, however, found the work difficult, if not impossible, without the help of a second person. Fortunately, about this time, another amateur organist, Reggie Evans, who worked in the downtown area, expressed an interest in playing the organ, and asked the manager, Julia Smith, if he could come into the theatre during his lunch break. Acting on Ev Bassett's advice that the more the organ was played, the better it would be, permission was granted. Evans and Bassett soon became a team and restored the 2/10 Wurlitzer to near-perfect playing condition. Their working partnership was so successful that they decided to go into business together repairing pipe organs in local churches. As organists, these two also complimented one another — Reggie couldn't play a note without his music, and Ev couldn't read

a note of music and played entirely by ear.

Ev continued to spend his Sunday mornings at the State, and in 1946 began opening the afternoon show with a musical interlude when the doors opened at 12:45, and soon had a regular following of organ fans who sent requests up to him via the ushers. In 1958, when he acquired his own pipe organ, a Robert Morton from the Strand Theatre in Winsted, Connecticut, he cut down on his number of Sundays at the State.

The Wurlitzer was destined for several more near-misses from water damage. In 1955, a week after the big flood of that year, there were more heavy rains, and because the storm drains were still full and clogged with debris, the water came into the theatre, and three or four inches collected in the pit but never got over the platform and did no apparent damage to the organ. However, at the first attempt to play it, there was a definite gurgling sound when the pistons were pushed in and some things would not play. Bassett deduced that water had seeped into the air line that went to the pit, and

by putting his hand over the end of the pipe to increase the wind velocity, about thirty gallons of collected water was forced out, soaking Ev in the process. If this water had gotten inside the console, it would have been the end of it.

Another time water came in the stage door from the alley, across the stage, filled the footlights, and poured over the organ. The huge, old-fashioned shawl that was kept over the console to protect it from dust miraculously saved the console from damage.

The worst incident, however, occurred in the 1960s when the title curtain, or "Traveler," was being pulled, caught on a stage light. The partially unscrewed bulb went on. It took about 45 minutes for it to heat up sufficiently to catch fire. The fire then went up the traveler and a portion of the screen disintegrated. The asbestos curtain, called upon for the first time in 30 years, automatically descended as it was intended to do. However, the water curtain turned on, splashed water all over the stage and raised the inlaid name plates on the console. Once again the organ's charmed life was evident.

After 1956, when Ev Bassett ended his ten-year stint of Sunday afternoon shows, the organ was used only occasionally. In October of 1962, about 50 members of the Connecticut Valley Chapter held a midnight jam session following the late show. On January 14, 1972, Rosa Rio was presented in a concert sponsored by PRIDE environmental groups of Torrington and Thomaston.

On April 25, 1972, the State Theatre, the last place Glenn Miller ever played in America, where Charles Laughton sold war bonds from the stage and the place that was the scene of a Rosalind Russell world premiere (Roz was a Waterbury native) closed its doors. The theatre had been sold to the Waterbury Civic Theatre for use as a municipal performing arts center and was to be renamed the Waterbury Civic Center.

Long-time caretaker of the Wurlitzer, Ev Bassett, continued to be welcomed at the theatre and occasionally played the organ before shows. Through Ev's influence, the Connecticut Valley Theatre Organ Society was allowed to hold their February, 1975 meeting at the Civic Center; and on October 11, 1975, as

part of CVTOS's Autumn Serenade Regional Convention, Lowell Ayars was presented in concert at the 2/10 Wurlitzer. For this concert, the couplers from the New Haven Paramount 2/10 Wurlitzer, which the chapter has in storage, were substituted for the originals, increasing the instrument's volume threefold.

The theatre again changed hands in 1976 and reopened as the Center Theatre, a family movie house with Ev Bassett once again at the console between shows.

In 1977, there was still another change of ownership as Ralph and Sal Barilla took over the reins. Affirming their interest in continuing the maintenance of the organ, CVTOS was invited to hold their April 1977 meeting at the Center presenting Lou Hurvitz in concert.

On Saturday, July 30, 1977, the State Theatre Mighty Wurlitzer's theatre career ended gloriously under the talented fingers of the great Gaylord Carter. It was on this occasion that the owners, in need of capital to modernize the building, informed CVTOS that the 2/10 Wurlitzer was for sale.

Chapter members, in absentia, Bill Hastings and Joe Colliano, who make their home in North Truro, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod, were already the owners of a 2/5 hybrid pipe organ, but had made no secret of the fact that their ambition was to own a Wurlitzer. Tipped off the next day by telephone of the availability of their dream organ, they made a bid for the instrument which was eventually accepted by the owners.

Hastings and Colliano commissioned Foley-Baker Organ Company of Manchester, Connecticut, to remove the organ from the theatre and reassemble it in their home. Mike Foley and his crew began dismantling the instrument the last week of August, a job which took four days. Everything had to be removed from the chambers by way of thirty-foot ladders. Getting out the heavy pipe chests was a Herculean task. The largest Allied Van Lines truck available was required to transport the carefully packed parts, and it arrived in North Truro on Friday, September 2nd. It took five men from 9:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. to painstakingly unload. The garage was bursting at the seams, relays were in the cellar, bits and pieces in the over-the-garage



Everett Bassett, longtime caretaker of the State 2/10 Wurlitzer, at the console.

Gaylord Carter plays the final concert in the State Theatre, in July, 1977.



room, and, in the dining room brooded the toy counter.

Installation couldn't begin until spring, because the old small chamber that housed the hybrid's five ranks had to be torn off and a new one, 21' x 12', added that would accommodate ten ranks. To conform with the half-cathedral ceiling of the approximately 40' x 20' living room, the addition is about 22' at the highest point and slopes down to about 12' on the low side, and is divided into two chambers. The swell shades are mounted horizontally and were not altered. The console sets directly in front of them. The blower is in the garage and not a sound from it can be heard in the living room. Relays are in the basement.

Mike Foley and Phil Carpenter literally "moved in" for the eight weeks it took to complete the installation. According to Mike, this was a particularly fine instrument on which to work. Because of Ev Bassett's tender, loving care, it was in mint condition and contained all of its original parts. It still had the original factory installation marks making reassembly relatively easy (if installing a Wurlitzer can ever be called easy), and is installed in its new location exactly as it was in the Waterbury theatre.

Members of CVTOS were invited to come to North Truro on September 9, 1978 to become reacquainted with their old friend, now the "Jobi" Wurlitzer, in its new home. "Jobi," a contraction of Joe and Bill, is a well-known name on Cape Cod. Tourists have prized the boys' original art pottery, which bears the Jobi signature, for many years. Some years ago they also owned and operated the old Highland House Hotel near Highland Light in North Truro, with Bill doubling evenings as organist in the lounge. For a short time they also operated a small club where Bill's music was featured.

In the summer of 1979, they decided to let the organ again entertain the public. They approached the Truro Historical Society and offered to put on weekly benefit concerts in their home, an offer which was gratefully accepted. Each Thursday evening, from July to early September, Hastings played the organ and Colliano the piano for a full living room of paying guests (about 40 could be fitted comfortably). As word of the



Lowell Ayars at the Autumn Serenade Regional Convention, October, 1975.

concerts spread, they were forced to squeeze in just a few more each week and were booked solid with a long stand-by list in case of cancellations. The last couple of weeks of August, in answer to popular demand, they increased the number of concerts to 3 and 4 a week. The summer concert season for 1980 promises to be equally, if not more successful.

On September 8, 1979, at the second of what all have decided should be an annual Jobi bash, the Wurlitzer's 50th birthday was celebrated by about 75 ConnValChaps and guests

from Rhode Island and New York. In honor of the occasion, a commemorative plaque and an album of photos and articles tracing the organ's history were presented to Bill Hastings and Joe Colliano from Connecticut Valley Theatre Organ Society. It was a gala affair, and there was music, music, music from 2:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m.

Theatre organ is alive and well on Cape Cod, and the golden years of the former State Theatre Wurlitzer, now the Jobi Wurlitzer, promise to be her very best. □

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