

The writer first encountered the formidable talents of Verne Langdon a few years ago when he noted a review of a record playing by "Johann Sebastian Bork," a record which featured a very distinctive style of contemporary piano playing rendered on a "Honky Chord"* (yes, rendered!) by an ancient Viennese court musician who must have been a leftover from Mozart's time, judging from the courtly baroque costume, powdered wig and Cyrano de Bergerac-style elongated proboscis pictured on the jacket. The label title was an unlikely one — Electric Lemon Records. Fascinated, we awaited the next "Lemon" release, a pipe organ record purportedly played by "Erik, the Phantom of the Opera," a gallimaufry of fresh Parisian sewer music (including a Phantom-conducted sewer tour, with oozing sound effects). This guy had to be a weirdo! Yet his next "Lemon" (uncredited) plucked at the heartstrings of Americans with two volumes of circus music played on a restored Tanglely calliope. Next a platter credited to alter ego J.S. Bork and loaded with harpsichord music, followed by a release of Edgar Allen Poe verses voiced by veteran actor John Carradine with pipe organ settings cued to the mood of the sepulchral poetry.

All the above was the work of one Verne Langdon, aided and egged on by showman Milt Larsen, well known for his Hollywood Magicians' Club dubbed "The Magic Castle." The next Langdon effort we became aware of was Verne's talent for makeup; he created many of the simian physiognomies for the short-lived TV series which continued the monkey business originated in five feature films involving *The Planet of the Apes*.

"After Bork, gorilla faces were easy," says Verne. After doing makeup for the PBS-TV series, *Visions*, we heard he was working on illusions at the Universal Studios tour attraction wherein selected visitors were made up to resemble some of film's horror characters for participation in sketches based on scenes from such classics as *Dracula* or *The Wolf Man*, for the amusement of other visitors. This feature ran for five years to capacity visitor audi-

*a harpsichord with all white keys.



the Verne Langdon Legend

From store window demonstrator to Dracula's Castle, his path has been strewn with organs

by Stu Green

Photos by Sandy Fields and
Stu Green

Photo Above: Droll comedian Verne Langdon made up as "Honkychordist" Johann Sebastian Bork. In this guise he has appeared on stage and on nationwide TV. His act consists of Bavarian-accented patter between selections played in contemporary jazz style on the Honkychord. Bork's record albums have resulted in a Bork cult whose disorganized members show up at his performances sporting "I Like Bork" pins. It takes Verne five hours to complete this intricate makeup.

ences. Its cost of \$200,000 was absorbed many times over by visitor admissions.

Preoccupation with the macabre was nothing new for Verne Langdon. Long fascinated with the monster characters which Universal Studios has always brought to the silver screen, as far back as 1963 he had negotiated a licensing deal to produce studio quality masks of such friendly hauntings as the studio's famous "Mummy," "the Frankenstein Monster," and Lon Chaney's "Phantom of the Opera" and the bell-ringing "Hunchback."

Then Universal decided that their tour attraction, which already boasted a swim-through by the *Jaws* shark and an attack by *Star Wars*-type space invaders, really needed the blood curdling which only the tried and true veteran stars of more than five decades of cascading screams and groans could supply. But how to use these long-established purveyors of goose bumps to get the full measure of sepulchral effectiveness in the brief time the tour schedule allowed?

Call in Verne Langdon! Verne is a multiple threat artist, with credentials as an organist, composer, makeup technician, producer, writer and special effects master — all talents which could be applied to get the desired result: to scare the living kapok out of studio tourists. He had accomplished a fair degree of this for the studio back in 1975 when he created the aforementioned "Land of a Thousand Faces" for the tour, using visitors as subjects for horror makeup treatment. But this time professional actors and actresses would be the monsters, and their skills plus Verne's makeup and staging would supply greater chills. Verne was well aware that appropriate music would heighten the chilling scenes he had in mind for a re-creation of "Dracula's Castle," a project he envisioned as the ultimate in live action horror.

He started to compose; he came up with some excellent musical cues, but there was a catch. He had never learned to read music! So he couldn't make his ideas permanent on staves. But there was a way. Verne called upon his partner in a mutual music business to put on paper what his agile musical mind dreamed up. David Roberts is blessed with a sharp



One of Electric Lemon's first record releases was *Phantom of the Organ* with "Erik" (Langdon) playing such toe-tapping originals as "Depression," "The Devil's Love," and "Dementia Macabre." The Paris catacombs organ was impersonated by the Lorin Whitney Studio WurliMorton.

and accurate musical ear. He wrote what Verne composed but sometimes couldn't recall in exact detail.

But who could play the intricate notation from the manuscript? Verne recalled his days of growing up in San Jose, Calif. He remembered the exceptional musical talent of his friend, Jim Roseveare, a lad who could rattle off any notation set before him. He wondered whether Jim would care to take a break in his current preoccupation with his career as a banker. He would.

Jim Roseveare has been a fixture in Bay Area theatre organ circles ever since the "bug" captured his imagination while listening to an organ broadcast from the Oakland Paramount many years ago. He is well known for his distinctive concert repertoire, especially his accurate recreations of Jesse Crawford's 1920s recordings. Because Verne's score would be for organ, Roseveare was the man to play it.

With Universal Studios and the Lorin Whitney recording studio both being properties of the Music Corporation of America (MCA), activity gravitated to the Whitney 4/34 WurliMorton. The instrument was no stranger to Langdon; he has cut several of his "Lemon" records on it.

On arriving for the recording session, Roseveare observed, "I found the organ in good, but not concert-ready condition." After some touching up, he added, "It's much gentler in person than is evident on records."

Then the work commenced.

"Dave Roberts' charts were in

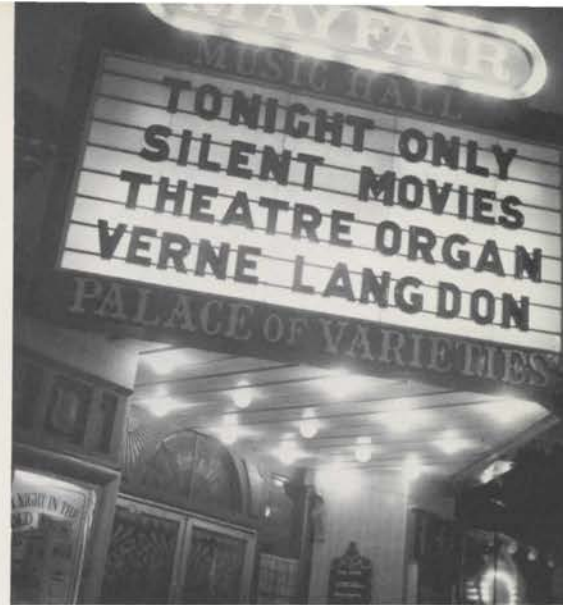


For his silent movie show, Verne rented a good quality electronic organ. The film on this occasion was *The Phantom of the Opera* — naturally.

themselves just as raw music, artistically satisfying and fun to play. Working with Verne and Dave was an absolute pleasure," said Jim.

When all the music had been recorded, the three listened to the playback. The results were so electrifying that the three almost spoke as one: "This music deserves some orchestral interludes!"

Universal willingly made more budget available and orchestral passages were scored around the organ originals. The orchestra was recorded in a larger studio and the resulting music was carefully mixed, a balance between organ and orches-

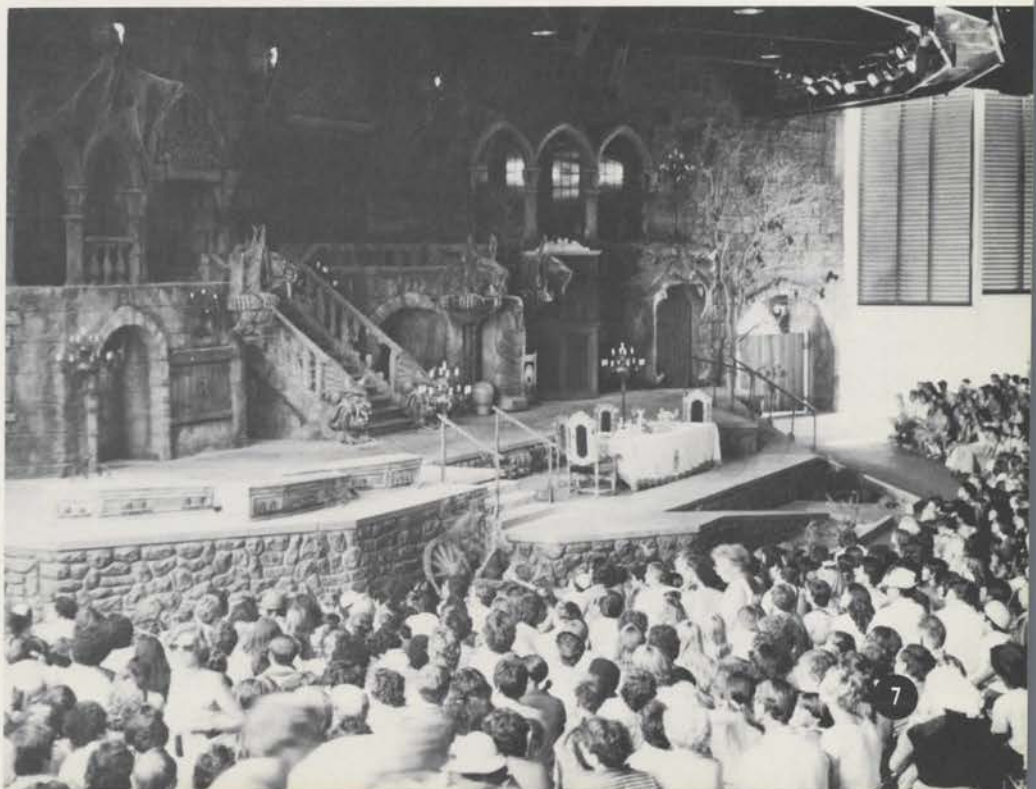


Langdon was the first to accompany a silent film show at the Mayfair Music Hall since the house's Robert Morton was removed many years ago.

tra, although the orchestra often dominates.

Why the orchestra in "Phantomland?" Dave Roberts explains: "Our original concept called for organ accompaniment throughout, but as the project developed, it became more and more obvious we really needed a score played by a 36 piece orchestra . . . We would have liked to have heard more of Jim (organ) on the final mix, but if you're listening you'll find him — especially where the Phantom digs into a little Bach and his band of ghoulish (robot) musicians takes over with a Dixieland treatment of 'Travelin' Rag.'"

Universal Studios tourists, 2500 strong, await the start of one of the twelve daily performances in "Dracula's Castle." The creepy doings commence when the stars enter via the three coffins on the stage. Verne Langdon dreamed up the scene and the action during a nightmare. His original music adds to the eerie atmosphere. Universal spent \$3,000,000 to stage the illusion of bringing the dead to life.





During a pause in rehearsal composers Dave Roberts and Verne Langdon exchange pleasantries with "The Mummy" who plays a role in the Dracula act.

since become one of her top clients. It was costly but well worth the price, admits Langdon. It forced him to develop each of his talents to money-making calibre. "Have you put your wife through law school lately?" he asks, not too innocently.

Although Vern has put in time playing in gin mills, staging Korla Pandit concerts and even cueing silent films, his other abilities, such as makeup, have also paid off.

"Believe me it was more fun making up Ann Margaret for the 'Hollywood Girls' TV show than it was trying to make an actor look like an ape," said Verne. But speaking of pay-offs, his "Dracula's Castle" production for Universal involved

the largest expenditure yet. To put the vampire in a proper setting, surround him with props, music score and supporting cast ran up a bill for \$3,000,000. But Universal is happy with the 12-a-day show, including four changes of cast.

At 38, Verne Langdon lives with his wife, Dawn, in his Hollywood Hills home. Now called a "creative consultant," he is philosophical. Looking fondly at his wife, he explains the well-matched couple's success. "We both fought many fights and endured many hardships to get where we are today — but we were successful in slashing our way to the middle!"

That's the way he talks. □

It's one of Verne's compositions.

Although Verne Langdon is now firmly established as one of Hollywood's magic makers, his first love remains music. He started early. As a teenager he could be seen demonstrating electronic organs in the windows of San Jose music stores. Both the Ferguson music store and Sherman Clay later sponsored Verne's seven-nights-a-week radiocast. All that before he was 21.

After seven years at San Jose State College, he married a beautiful co-ed and moved to Hollywood, bringing along his ancient Hammond. He put his wife through law school and has



Enter the star! There are four "Count Draculas" seen during the twelve daily performances. This one is actor Tommy Baker.

By day he's a mild-mannered business man who relaxes by playing the nearest theatre organ. But when he plays score music for the "Dracula's Castle" show, Jim Roseveare (shown here at the Vollum Style 285 Wurlitzer) undergoes changes in musical output worthy of a Wolf Man transformation.

No, this is not Jim Roseveare but the actor portraying "Erik, the Phantom of the Organ" exemplifies the mood of the music heard during the "Castle Dracula" show, music recorded for the show by Jim and an orchestra. The legend here departs from history; the organ Lon Chaney played in the original "Phantom" was equipped with a horseshoe console — with drawknob stops yet!

