

# VOX POPS



Conducted by Stu Green

*Readers are encouraged to submit interesting sidelights on the organ hobby (exclusive of chapter news items), material they believe will be of general interest about local organ activities and installations, and the people who work at the hobby. We know "there's VOX POPS in them there chapters" and it requires only a 12¢ postcard to get the message to the VOX POPS Editor, Box 3564, Granada Hills, California 91344. If the contributor can spare a 18¢ stamp, please include a contrasty black and white photo which need not be returned.*

Some time ago we reported the efforts of a small dedicated group of enthusiasts in Lockport, N.Y. which hoped to install a theatre organ in the Palace Theatre there. According to prime mover Gregory Nellist the deal collapsed due to complications with the owners of the house. That is not the end of the story. A nearby senior citizens home recently spent \$4,000 to build a pipe chamber to accommodate the instrument which was to have gone into the Palace. This may be a theatre-organ first — an installation in a senior citizens home. Watch these pages as the story develops.

Tennessee ATOSer Lee Green visited two original 3/13 Wurlitzer theatre installations in his state during November last, and found both in very good condition and management cooperative. The first was the Orpheum on Main St. in Memphis. The manager permitted Lee to play before the evening show. The dome theatre and organ were both in ex-

cellent condition, reports Lee, except there was no air pressure in the console so the combo buttons didn't change registration. Next, Lee visited Knoxville and the Tennessee Theatre on Gay St. He was again treated courteously by the manager and permitted ample time to play the organ, which he had not experienced since 1978. He reports that the theatre, organ and the red and gold console are in remarkably good condition, adding "this has to be one of the better installations in the country today."

But is it pipe organs which inspire those long drives from Lee's Nashville home? Not entirely. The guy is a football nut, and he goes where the college games are played. But he admits to the added incentive for those long drives if there are also pipes at the end of the rainbow.

A new dimension was added to the movie program during a showing of *Flash Gordon* recently in Ogden, Utah's Orpheum Theatre. The incident described as "The Phantom of the Orpheum," but theatre and police officers found it far from amusing. Patrons told police that during the movie, screams for help were heard, coming from behind the screen. Two police officers in the au-

dience investigated, and found a 39-year-old tourist from Hoboken, N.J. trapped in a walled-in opera box at the top of a stairway. Paramedics, employing a block and tackle, rescued the victim who said he was robbed of \$900 and beaten in the theatre three nights previously. A broken ankle and head cut were reminders that the spirit of Ming the Merciless prevailed.

Does anyone have a spare 3 or 4 manual Wurlitzer console they'll sell to a TO club in Scotland? The East Kilbride Cinema Organ Society has bought the 2/10 from the Edinburgh Victoria Cinema, the last Wurlitzer left in Robert Burns country. They want to enlarge it by about 6 ranks but there is no room for expansion on the original console. The cost of a new console would be prohibitive, says Cyril Wood, the club's secretary, so they will opt for a used key-desk if one is available. We'll gladly forward any pertinent information.

Our man in South Africa, Arthur Hovis, informs us that the 4/14 Wurlitzer in the 20th Century Theatre in Johannesburg had the distinction of being the last new Wurli to be installed in a major theatre anywhere — 1940. Arthur says it is very highly



unified, with most voices available at four pitches. The design was by South Africa's prominent organist, Dean Herrick. It is currently installed in a former church hall in Knysna and is owned by Eric Schroder.



Pursuant to its policy of trying out new ventures, the Radio City Music Hall on January 24th, 25th, and 26th, presented a very rare film, made in 1927, one which runs for over four hours. It was Abel Gance's classic silent *Napoleon*, which never achieved status due to its limited showing originally. For the Music Hall performances, a new and original score was composed by Carmine Coppola and played by the 60-piece American Symphony Orchestra and organist Leonard Raver of the New York Philharmonic and teacher at Juilliard.

Raver was loud in his praise for the MH Wurlitzer. "I've been having the most wonderful treat, living a dream come true. The organ is probably the last of the great theatre organs and any organist would give his eyeteeth to play it. With four manuals, full pedal-board, 4300 pipes and even a grand piano built into it, it is also notable for its brass and tremolos."



New Yorkers who heard Christmas music clanging from the Carillon in St. Patrick's Cathedral were actually hearing Lee Erwin, on coded tape or live. Lee's interest in Carillons started when the very able Don Schwing (who services the ATOS 2/13 "Little Mother" in Carnegie Hall Cinema) was called on to devise an electronic system to ring the huge bells. Don and Lee worked together on the project and Lee encoded the tapes which control the ringing mechanism. But Lee played it live for the Christmas midnight Mass, broadcast on national TV.

Lee says, "Interest in theatre organs has some interesting side effects."



When organist David Peckham was three weeks old in 1960, his parents brought the infant into the RKO Palace Theatre in Rochester to hear the Wurlitzer as played by



David Peckham. He attracted a larger than usual audience.

house organist Tom Grierson. Twenty years have passed since that milestone in David's life, and now he has been making a name for himself at consoles in upstate New York. His latest achievement occurred on January 16th when he played before his largest audience at Rochester's Auditorium Theatre. At the ex-Palace console, he entertained 1433 devotees in a varied program. Included was a novel treatment of E.T. Paull's "The Midnight Fire Alarm" which utilized photos and Currier & Ives sketches on slides to illustrate old-time fire-fighting. David also accompanied *Teddy at the Throttle* starring a very young Gloria Swanson and Wallace Beery. Even in blustery weather, the lure of David Peckham playing the well-maintained 4/22 Wurlitzer was a potent magnet for folks who would otherwise have not braved the elements.



Talk about troubles connected with pipe organs! Bert Buhrman, organist of the School of the Ozarks, has had them recently. "The 3/15 Wurlitzer's reservoirs had a much needed releathering, but the tremos got messed up in the aftermath. We're trying to get the fellow who did the work, back to get them in order."

While the chapel's Skinner is down, a Hammond is being used. During the February 1st service, an adapter which was hooked into the electric line, went dead. A choir boy

tried to hold the plug into the socket. It was a Communion service with a lot of playing. Then, the plug started smoking. A day later, we found that the hot plug had been laid on a cushioned seat and it burned its way through. Bert says, "It's a wonder we didn't have a fire."



The North Texas ATOS Chapter had a bright idea; why not stage an old fashioned movie show at old fashioned prices? They planned it for Dallas' John Beck Hall which houses the former El Paso Plaza Theatre 3/15 Wurlitzer. Then they talked Charlie Evans into accompanying the chosen feature film, *Broken Blossoms*, with Lillian Gish and Richard Barthelmes. Charlie put a lot of effort into selecting his score, mostly from his own library. Show night was January 30th and the film played to a full house. The raves which followed the performance were another type of music. But, you ask, how does this differ from all the other silent movie shows described in these pages? The difference was the admission price — fifty cents (\$0.50!). It was partly an effort to attract new members, and with admission prices to movies edging upward from \$5.00 and live show admissions gone through the roof, chances of success are great.

But how do they do it for half a buck?



While visiting Utah over the Christmas holidays, Californian Elbert Dawson did some sleuthing for us on local organ matters. In Salt Lake City he learned that work on Dr. Conrad Jenson's home installation is progressing again after a long delay caused by puzzling technical difficulties. Cal Christensen is now working on the 14-ranker (plus piano) and has solved some major problems. And Larry Bray has made some changes in his Organ Loft building to enhance the sound of the 5/34 Wurli. He has added a sounding board to reflect the music so "you're really surrounded by the organ. The chambers go right around you. It's more than stereo — it's quad," says Larry.

About a year ago we heard that Joanne Harmon built a new home but didn't plan to install her theatre

organ in it. So what became of the organ? Elbert found out; it was sold to Rudy Frey of San Bruno, Calif.



The elegant "slick" magazine, *The Wichitan*, in evaluating local citizens, has saddled Billy Nalle with the "Most Enthusiastic Transplanted Wichitan" award. 'Twas but a few years ago that the talented lad swung his twin carpetbags aboard the stage for Wichita after a disastrous decade of unmitigated success cueing "soaps" in Gotham City, which he referred to as "Nineveh on the Hudson." Billy and Wichita seem to have "meshed" and if we sound a bit envious it's because we like our longstanding two word description of Billy better than Wichita's four words. We dubbed him "terminal Optimist."



Although CATOE was successful in helping to save the Chicago Theatre, it appears that the Oriental is doomed. According to *Variety*, the place is to be shuttered before May 3rd. The owners sought and received the green light to terminate the lease with the operators who have been showing a steady diet of martial art films and others. Also, dissatisfaction over the run-down status of the house — poor cleaning, rats in the balcony, etc., was another reason for closing.

The 3200-seat Oriental was opened in 1926, and achieved fame as the haven of Paul Ash and his Merry Madcap Gang. At the 4/20 Wurlitzer for a long period was Henri A. Keates, the Oriental Organ Rajah, famous for his community singing novelties. Future plans call for a 50,000 square-foot shopping mall on the first two stories. Above this would be a 1600-seat theatre which would retain the Oriental's fancy interior. Rumors have the Wurlitzer going into a hotel ballroom which has chambers but never had an organ.



Our music reviewer, Walt Beaupre, writes about organist Karl Cole. "In addition to being one of the classiest Matinee Idols on the pizza/pipes circuit, he has a hidden talent for 'instant music.' One Friday evening at the height of the college foot-



Karl Cole. So Michigan fought in 6/8 tempo.

ball season Karl spent his 'half time' breaks at the jam packed Pied Piper Pizza Peddler in Warren, Michigan, with Betty Mason, Sally Johnson and their guests from London, Washington, and New England. At one point Karl mentioned that the fans were insisting on the 'Michigan Fight Song' — which he'd never heard. Somehow, amid noise levels approaching the threshold of pain, Betty and Sally called out the melody notes and chord changes while Karl wrote them on an available napkin. Then back to the United Artist Wurlitzer console where cool-Karl played the 'Fight Song' to the delight of the foot-stamping, sing-along audience. Was it the definitive version of the college classic? Not quite. Somebody forgot to tell Karl that the rhythm was 4/4 rather than 6/8."



Radio station WOR, New York, has an afternoon talk show, hosted by Jack O'Brien. Awhile back, according to Mrs. Dolph Gobel, O'Brien had as his guest, Lawrence Bergreen who has authored a new book on the early days of radio, "Look Now, Pay Later." Reminiscing about radio in the twenties, Jack recalled hearing Ted McCormick read poetry over WLW, Cincinnati, while a fellow by the name of Thomas Waller played pipe organ background music. The show aired between one and two in the morning, and Waller was an unknown until he became "Fats." Most people don't know it, but Fats Waller was a terrific organist in addition to his pro-

clivities as a jazz pianist and composer. After his first experience at an organ console, his remark was, "Man, what a crazy pi-anna!"



George Wright playing a pizzeria gig? Unusual but not without precedents. George's February 9th concert was held at Mike Ohman's Great American Wind Machine pasta parlor (G.A.W.M. for short) in Reseda, Calif. Because of limited seating (340), admission was a whopping \$10.00 a ducat. Customer resistance was nil; the place was packed. George, looking more robust than we've seen him of late, and attired in his almost white suit, had some surprises. George, Mike and others had reworked the organ to sound like the type Jesse Crawford preferred. This gave George an incentive to play some of his recreations of Jesse's famous 78's.

It also brought George into close proximity with his audience. They literally surrounded the console platform. This gave him an opportunity to banter with his audience members, something he does well.

During the course of the evening George announced that he had been selected to premiere the Oakland Paramount's organ, probably in November. He also mentioned that Ken Kukuk had wended his developing home installation and like all first windings it sounded mighty sour.

Then he told his audience that Mike Ohman had donated all concert receipts to further the Wright home installation (he's been hit by inflation, like all of us). His closer was his famous arrangement of the "Stars and Stripes Forever," complete with Piccolo tweets during the Trio.



One ATOS member who disagrees with Lee Erwin's recent statement in the *New York Times* that New York City "wasn't much of a theatre organ town," is Doc Bebko, who can be classed as an authority on the subject, as he was active there in the great era.

Doc says, "Let's look at the record. Doc Baker told me that the Rivoli's Wurlitzer was a 'blockbuster.' Henry B. Murtagh's favorite theatre, the Rialto, had a 3/15 Wurlitzer with much presence. The

Capitol's Mauro-Cottone at the Estey was a great favorite of mine. Herbert Henderson at the Piccadilly's 4/28 Marr & Colton; the 3-console 34-rank Roxy Kimball with Lew White, Emil Valazco, etc.; the Beacon's 4/20 Wurlitzer; Hippodrome's 4/28 Wurlitzer with Walter Wild and John Priest; Brooklyn Strand with John Hammond; RKO Chester with Raul de Toledo Galvao (Paul Brass); the Crawfords and Sigmund Krumgold at the Paramount, plus the many broadcasts originated.

"I skipped as many as I mentioned: Jack Ward, Dick Leibert, Ann Leaf, Ashley Miller, Ray Bohr, etc. Lee Erwin was from the South, played there and in Cincinnati after the big era, not in New York."

True, but we are glad he's carrying the torch in New York now.



Just before the holidays, organist Rosa Rio was observed on cable TV covering the Housatonic Valley area, lending her talents to the Marines' "Toys for Tots" project.



Organist Frank Olsen, back from Scotland where he was made Honorary President of the newly formed East Kilbride Cinema Organ Society, tells of a concert he played for the group in the Town Hall at Ayr. The club had toted in an electronic while ignoring the ancient 3/30 Lewis straight organ slumbering in the gallery. Frank says the first half of the concert went well, but after intermission they couldn't restart the electronic. Frank was desperate as he



Frank Olsen. An adventure in Scotland.



Bud Taylor is very much alive.

(Stufoto)

climbed the stairs to the gallery to see if there was any possibility of pressing the Lewis into service. He pushed the start button and prayed. Outside of one brief cipher and a Clarinet which was permanently "on," the venerable Lewis behaved well, right to the end of the concert. The incident aroused the interest of club members in search of a project. It looks as though the Lewis will be restored by them.



Dolton McAlpin reports that the 2/6 Robert Morton from the razed Baton Rouge Paramount, may have a second life yet. Recall that it was badly damaged during a rough transfer, and Dolton feared for its life. However, reports of its demise may have been exaggerated. It has been purchased by organ enthusiasts Bob and Tippy Garner for installation in their Jackson, Mississippi home — as soon as they can untie the knots in the String pipes.



Another case of a passing being exaggerated comes from organist Bud Taylor. He wants it known that he's not dead. Bud first heard of his "demise" when friends phoned and when he answered there was a stunned silence followed by a surprised "you're alive!" Bud doesn't know how the rumor got started but wants

it known that he is alive and well and living in retirement in Carmichael, California.



In the little town of Carnation, Washington, is a tavern which looks more like a church than a bistro. It is called "Goliath's Pit," Goliath being a 3-manual Wurlitzer organ originally installed in a Salem, Oregon theatre in 1926. Like its name, the building has stirred up some goliath-size controversies between the owner, Kirk Whitcombe, and the authorities. Such things as building height, septic system, ramp for handicapped, firewood stacked outside the front door, unpopped popcorn kernels on the floor, and a liquor license, all were seized upon, simply because officials didn't want another tavern in the town. Things have been resolved, though, and after council meetings, the members now adjourn to Goliath's Pit for refreshment. Whitcombe plans to run for mayor next fall.



The long, involved project to restore Shea's Buffalo 4/28 Wurlitzer is about one-third completed, according to one of the workers, Dave Vanderhoek. First, management built a new workshop on the seventh floor next to the elevator, complete with tables, electric outlets, air com-

pressor, handsaw and wood planer. The new location is warm and dry as compared with the old shop which was under the Pearl Street sidewalk. "The right side of the six-chamber organ is mostly rebuilt and wiring in the telephone cable q-tronics multiplex system is starting. Our console in California is refinished in dark mahogany, and is now having the stopkeys fitted."

Dave states that since the Buffalo has been declared a performing arts center, rock shows are included. "On January 26th, the sound crew was testing a several-hundred-watt system, and the resulting over-powering sound explosion easily exceeded that of the Wurlitzer as I remember it. How do the kids stand it? They'll

have hearing problems before they're 25."



Dan Semer. Sergeant Preston was there. (Stufoto)

The name of Dan Semer will be one to be heard with increasing frequency in the years ahead. The 29-year-old artist has had a struggle to become known in places other than Detroit, where he played two memorable concerts and is slated for a third; and in Rochester where he entertained 1205 on February 13th at the Auditorium. He has showmanship as evidenced by his flashy apparel, rapport with his audience, and even more important, he knows his way around a 4-manual console. In Rochester, he proceeded to employ voices and effects which haven't been exploited during the past couple of years. His program included numbers rarely heard on the circuit. For example, he played Von Resnick's "Donna Diana Overture" and asked the audience to name the radio program for which it served as a theme. One person correctly identified "Challenge of the Yukon" with Sergeant Preston. Dan is hopeful of launching a record, made on the DTOC Wurlitzer, but has been frustrated for 10 months by processors who insist on reducing the bass level.

One of the most embarrassing things that can happen to an organist is when the moment comes to start playing and no sound comes forth when the keys are pressed. ATOSer

Chard Walker recalls listening to a regularly scheduled 15-minute organ radiocast from KGER, Long Beach, Calif. The station had a small (ca. 7 ranks) studio Wurlitzer and the player then (in the '30s) was well-known theatre organist Ira Swett. During Ira's opening theme the organ simply quit. What to do? Fortunately Ira was a resourceful man. He stepped to the microphone and in a voice which revealed no trace of the confusion in the station as the technicians tried to find the trouble, he gave a 14-minute impromptu talk about the work of his sponsor, the Salvation Army. Chard says the result coming from his dome-topped Philco sounded as though the program had been planned that way. □

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