

THE OAKLAND PARAMOUNT AND ITS NEW WURLITZER

by Luana DeVol and
James Roseveare

The installation of the Paramount Theatre's four-manual Wurlitzer will be the finishing touch to the Art Deco building's superb restoration. The organ's premiere concert on November 7, 1981, will also celebrate the Paramount's 50th Anniversary.

The Paramount restoration was initiated by the Oakland Symphony Orchestra Association, which in 1971 was searching for a permanent home. Serving an area with two and one-half million people, the Symphony commissioned a study to evaluate the possibilities of creating a new center for the arts in the East Bay, just across the bridge from San Francisco.

When neither a new Symphony hall nor participation in an arts-convention complex appeared feasible, the Paramount was proposed as an alternative. The theatre, located in the central business district, had been shuttered for a time and sat vacant in disrepair. After investigation by engineers, arts experts, and acousticians, the 3,000-seat theatre was found to be ideal and the final report strongly advocated its acquisition and renovation.

The beautiful facade of Oakland's Paramount Theatre of the Arts.
(Catherine Centorbe Photo)





Above: Outer lobby. Right: The stage and proscenium, showing organ chamber grilles on either side. Grand drape down. (Catherine Centorbe Photo)

Designed by San Francisco architect Timothy Pflueger and highly acclaimed at the time of its opening in 1931, the theatre was a rare survivor of the movie palace era and a masterpiece of Art Deco architecture. Key individuals involved in the project, including the Symphony's Executive Director Jack Bethards, theatre historian Steve Levin, and Theatre Manager Peter Botto, recognized and appreciated the building's integrity. Thus, in December, 1972, the first restoration faithfully reproducing the original architect's concepts was begun, even though it might have been less costly to render the building simply functional as an orchestral hall.

Craftsmen took painstaking care in preserving the artwork in the theatre. First, massive scaffolding

was erected in the auditorium to enable workers to clean forty-two years of dust and smoke film from the walls and ceilings. Then, master craftsmen taught younger men the nearly lost art of gold-leafing, in order to recapture the original opulence of the plaster-cast relief walls. The Lower Lounge's smoking room was particularly challenging, as hand-painted murals had been badly vandalized. Three months were spent restoring these murals.

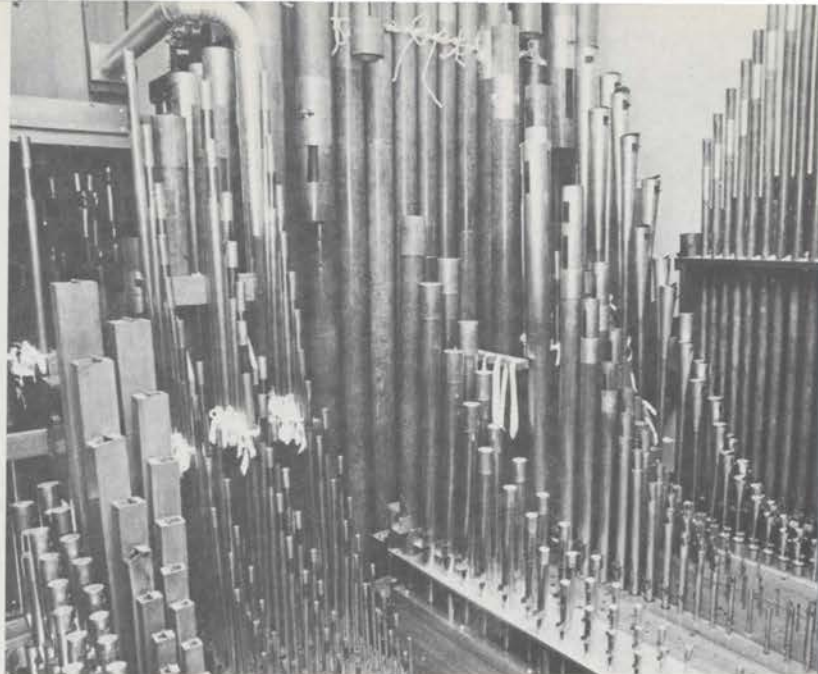
The theatre's irreplaceable furnishings were refinished and reupholstered, and each piece was returned to its original location by referring to photographs taken in 1932. Carpeting, an exact copy of the six-color original, was rewoven by the original manufacturer. The ivy-pattern green and gold mohair upholstery for the seating in the auditorium also had to be specially manufactured to match the original. The main curtain and grand drape were carefully duplicated — the originals were too worn and faded to be restored. All work was done with the utmost attention to detail and authenticity in recreating the Paramount's lush interior.

Elements of authenticity in the restoration included: (1) following a





Organ technicians Dolores Rhoads and Jim Roseveare check electrical connections on the Oakland Paramount's huge four-manual Wurlitzer organ console. Solid state equipment will transmit impulses from each key, tab and pedal on the console to the multitude of devices which control the instrument's pipes, percussions and special effects.



The Main. To name but a few ranks, left to right: Vox Humana, 4' Flute, 4' Viol de Orchestre, 4' Solo String, 4' Viol Celeste, Quintadena.

complete set of photographs taken early in 1932 and blueprints and the architectural files on the theatre provided by the original architect's firm, Milton T. Pflueger and Associates, and (2) consulting and in some cases re-employing workmen and artists who had worked on its construction and decoration in 1931.

The Paramount is recognized as one of the greatest expressions of the Art Deco period in America. Entered into the National Register of Historic Places in 1973 and named a California Registered Historical Landmark in 1976, the Paramount became a National Historic Landmark in 1977 in recognition of its importance as an example of the movie palace era, and for its excellence as an example of Art Deco design. As a result of its historical recognition, visitors from all over the globe have come to Oakland to see the Paramount.

The Paramount came equipped in 1931 with a 4/20 Wurlitzer Publix

No. 1. The organ was used intermittently until its removal in the late '50s, after which it spent a decade in storage, and another at Ken's Melody Inn Restaurant in Los Altos, California. Today, vastly enlarged, that organ is the central attraction at the Paramount Music Palace Restaurant in Indianapolis, Indiana.

The original Paramount Publix No. 1 Wurlitzer was the last of seventeen built, while the console, many ranks of pipes, windchests, and framing from the first Publix No. 1 are a part of the new organ. The first Publix No. 1 was sold in 1925 to the Capitol Theatre, Detroit. It later saw service in a skating rink and passed through several hands before being donated by J. B. Nethercutt to the Paramount in 1974. Preston M. "Sandy" Fleet later donated to the theatre a complete 4/26 Wurlitzer assembled from parts of several instruments (Chicago Tower Theatre Publix No. 1, New York Hippodrome Theatre Publix No. 1, and

Pittsburgh Stanley Theatre 3/27). The Paramount also received a donation of a classic organ. The classic organ and unneeded parts of the two Wurlitzers were auctioned to raise funds for the organ installation.

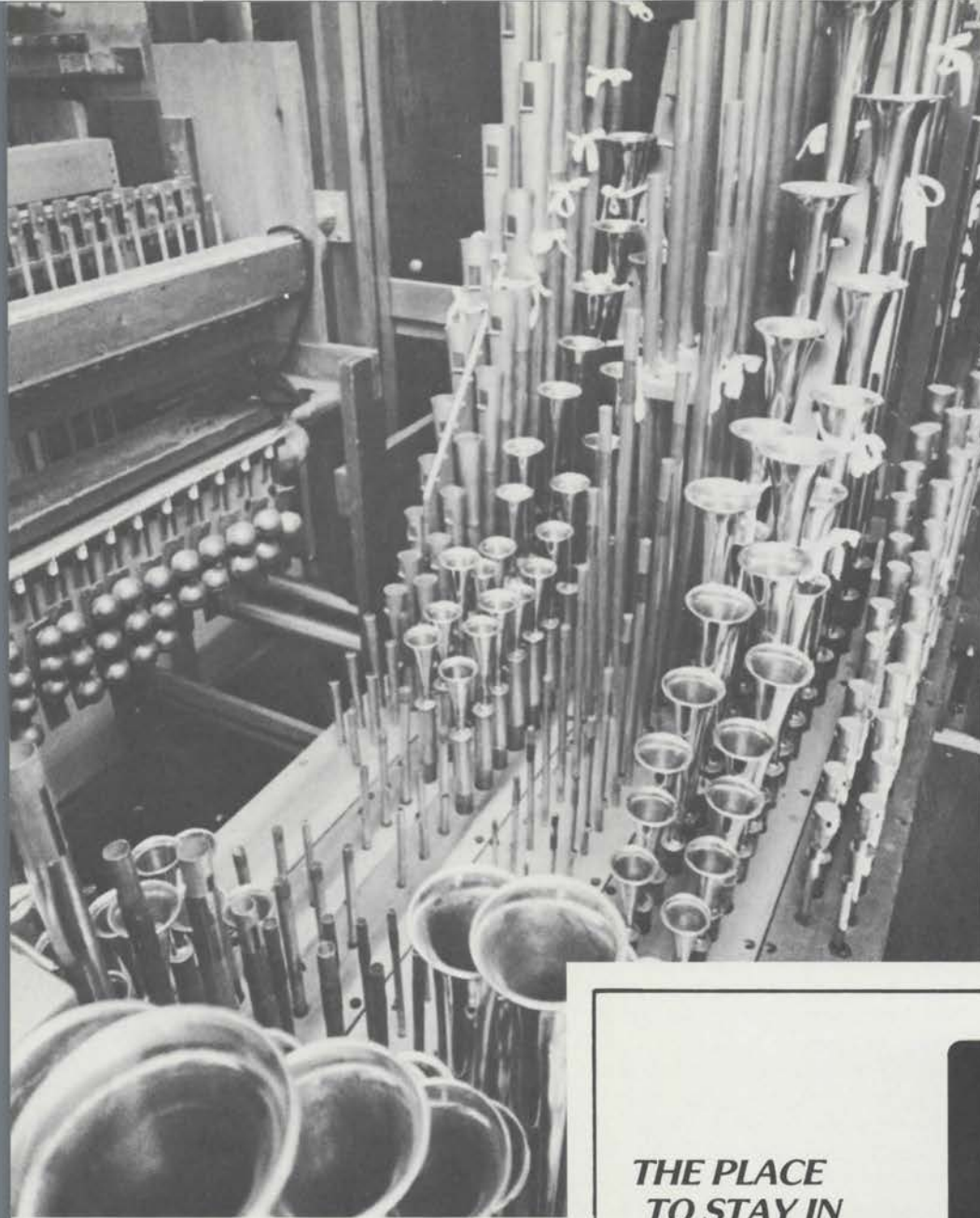
Tonally, the new Paramount Wurlitzer is unique for a variety of reasons, the most basic of which is its wind system. Original Wurlitzer installations customarily had only one stage of regulation between blower and windchest; the Paramount's has from two to four, including six static reservoirs, three rumble suppression baffles, and twenty-three regulators. The blower is a 25 hp Spencer Orgblo, originally from the California Theatre in San Francisco. As one might imagine, the goals of the wind system's design are steadiness, silence, and control. The winding is done entirely in sheet metal. There are thirteen tremulants.

In addition to the superb wind system, the Paramount Wurlitzer en-

(Below) — Fred Lake installing the solid state relay equipment in the Main Chamber.

(Right) — Jim Roseveare worked on the console to ensure that its smoothness of action will please the most finicky of players.





The Solo Chamber. View shows the Orchestral Oboe, Brass Sax, Solo String, Brass Trumpet, Vox Humana. Sleighbells and Glockenspiel are in background.

joys a compliment of pipework and percussion instruments in advance of that found on the standard Wurlitzer Publix No. 1. Added were four strings, a Flute Celeste, and an English Post Horn; two of the added strings extend to 16' pitch, thus rendering the pedal division capable of far more subtle dynamic terracing than was originally available. Finally, a second Marimba and a real orchestral Vibraharp were added.

To control the organ, a time-division multiplex solid-state digital relay, the largest of its type, was built by S'Andelco Inc., of San Diego. This relay provides immense flexibility and control, and allows the use of one coaxial cable from console to relay.

The stoplist has been expanded, but still adheres to Wurlitzer practice. For example, there are no 16' stops on the Accompaniment; the Trumpet and Orchestral Oboe are playable at 16' (T.C.) pitch on the Great; there are Tibia mutations on the Great, Bombarde, and Solo; and there are sub-octave, unison off, and octave couplers on the Great and Solo.

The pipework is installed in two chambers, located on either side of the proscenium. The main chamber is on the left, with unenclosed percussions installed above it, and the solo chamber is on the right. The original chambers were provided with extremely large shutter openings — these have been retained; in fact, the present shutters are from the original Wurlitzer installation. There are ninety-six swell shutters, each having its own motor. The expression capabilities and clarity of the organ have been further enhanced by reducing the size of the chambers by approximately 20%.

The resulting instrument promises to be as exciting as the beautiful Paramount Theatre itself. □

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