

Rose Diamond, Gem of the Console

Transcribed and Edited by
Lloyd E. Klos

Recently, Rose Diamond prepared a tape for the ATOS library concerning her experiences as a theatre and radio organist, with fellow organist Arlo Hults asking the appropriate questions. THEATRE ORGAN is indebted to both of them for allowing us to transcribe the material for this feature.

Miss Diamond has this to say about her early musical training: "On reading quite a few accounts of people interviewed on how young they were when they started, I have decided to say that when I was born, I had something clutched in my little hand which proved to be a tiny diploma. There has to be *some* preparation for those who play at age three or less! I have a picture of myself seated at an ancient upright piano at about age six, my feet way above the floor, and that's what delayed my studying organ at an early age. I was

Rose and colleague Arlo Hults record memories of the Broadway scene of the early '30s for the ATOS Archive. (Stufoto)



a child prodigy on the piano, practicing four or five hours daily before my yearly recitals.

"My start in the theatre was on piano, and it was at the Fox Japanese Garden, which was on the roof of the RKO Theatre at 96th Street and Broadway in New York. There was an outdoor theatre adjoining it, where in the summer, I played the piano for the features. Later on, I was asked to play the organ inside for the supper show, relieving the house orchestra until they returned for the night show.

"I had come to the Fox theatre chain through their contractor, Mike Krueger, who sent me to their various houses including the opening of the 1749-seat Lynbrook Theatre on Long Island. This was a vaudeville house, and the orchestra, conducted by Rudy Zwerling, played the acts. I played the feature picture until the orchestra appeared in the pit to play the overture. It was a very lovely engagement, and the organ was a beautiful Kimball.

"Another engagement was in the Regent Theatre which, if memory serves, was on 116th Street at Lenox Avenue. It has probably changed names, if it still exists. Then came a stint at the Audubon Theatre in Washington Heights, which I believe is now called the 175th Street Theatre.

"When accompanying the silents, we used cue sheets or music to create the proper mood or change of scene. The captions were absolutely unique. One was 'For Stealthy Action in the Dark.' Another was 'Extreme Tension Followed by Riot, Terrific Storm or Volcanic Eruption.' The prize caption, I thought,

was 'Pursuit, Intense Wrangling Almost to Blows!' Yes, those were the days. Everything was made 'perfectly clear.' My theme song was 'To a Wild Rose.'

"One day in the early thirties when between jobs, I was walking on Broadway, and passing Loew's State Theatre, checked the program listed outside. I saw the name of the same orchestra leader, Rudy Zwerling, with whom I had worked in the Lynbrook. I decided to go in and see him. He stated that he'd been there for some time, it was a lovely engagement, he was conducting the vaudeville, and was musical director of the house.

"In the course of conversation, he inquired whether I'd like to work at Loew's State. I replied that it was hardly possible as there was tremendous discrimination against women in orchestras and in any branch of

Rose Diamond at the 2/10 Wurlitzer in Pipes & Pizza in Reseda, California. She attended the annual show which the Los Angeles Professional Organists Club puts on to collect toys for needy children. (Stufoto)



the musical world in the Times Square area. The only woman organist in the area was Jesse Crawford's wife, Helen. She and her husband were playing twin consoles at the Paramount.

"Zwerling knew the situation, but he told me to leave it to him. In a short time, I was invited to play Loew's State which was one of the great things which happened to me. It was in the heart of town, whereas previously I had played neighborhood houses.

"My engagement at Loew's State included Sunday morning broadcasts, alternating with the other organist of the house, over WPAP, the Loew's radio station on the top of the theatre. Programs were arranged which would appeal to the average theatregoer. This isn't easy because you don't *know* the 'average' theatregoer's wishes. You might find some requests from Long Island for a classic number, and you might get a request from Park Avenue for a western tune. You couldn't find which neighborhood was particularly fond of anything.

"I was also busy with 'audience participation.' On every program, I'd play a few signatures from popular radio programs and offer a couple of passes to those who named all of them. The house furnished the passes gladly. Naturally, there had to be one which wasn't too easy to identify. Results were announced on all programs. It worked fine and the broadcast time was extended from a half hour to forty-five minutes, due to its success.

"In the course of this playing, a friend, Ed Wickes, who did some publicity for me previously, mentioned that I should look for the Sunday New York American's radio column whose writer was always complaining about the type of programs to which he had to listen. If he had his way, he would suggest a program which would please everybody; not too heavy on one side, not too light on the other.

"Ed originated the center two pages of the Sunday edition of the *Inquirer*, which became the 'bible' of all music publishers because they would watch for everything the writer said about numbers of the past, numbers of the present, what was going on in the broadcasting world, the theatre world and espe-

cially the music-publishing world. He was their god. No matter where you went to a music publisher, you'd find those two pages on his desk. The paper would also carry the 'Top Ten' or 'Top Twenty' list.

"So it was Ed Wickes' idea that I should write to the Hearst *Sunday New York American*, ask editor Reid his ideas for a program, and if he would send them to me, I'd play it. I didn't expect to get an answer, but I did, and he mentioned that he was very happy to suggest a program.

"There was a mixture of music. First, the march 'On the Mall,' composed especially for the Edwin Franco Goldman Band which performed in Central Park. Another was the 'Polovetsian Dances,' which was a little rough on organ. People don't realize that some things played by orchestras are not easy to play on organ. But, one has to do everything. There were also light classics by Ethelbert Nevin.

"I wrote back that I'd do the program, but Mother's Day came along and I couldn't do it that week. A notice to the effect appeared in the paper, saying it would be played at a later date. Finally, the day came. As I was sitting at the console, awaiting the signal, a message came to me saying Mr. Reid was on the phone, calling from the newspaper, and asking if I'd mention his name as being the promoter of that program. We did the show, and mentioned his name at the end, and when closing, we received a message from him with grateful appreciation and that he enjoyed the show. It struck me then that our egos are so different. A man in the public eye as he was, who wrote radio columns and was widely read, was satisfied at having his name mentioned on a broadcast. *Ours* would have to be different, because *we* valued every notice we could get in the papers.

"After my days at Loew's State, there were more radio programs. Theatre organ playing was the popular type, so even if we didn't play in the theatre itself, we still had the same playing style. One of the stations over which I played was WMCA, and had several programs from there. One of them was called *Goodwill Court*. The MC was A. L. Alexander, who was the promoter of this program.

"I had done another show for

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Hartz Mountain Food. Yes, the one for the canaries. Other things I did were all commercial programs. At the end of one, this A. L. Alexander rushed in and said, 'That type music which you just played, I want for a program I have in mind. I have an idea for a theme song and it's not going to be easy. I can't whistle and I can't sing, but if I beat out its tempo, maybe you'll get the time.' He beat out the rhythm and it did suggest one thing — the opening bars of the overture to the opera *Cavalleria Rusticana*. I played it, he exclaimed 'That's it!', and I got the job for the new program. It was the weirdest audition I, or anyone else, ever had!

"It was fortunate that I attended opera very frequently, sometimes three times a week, standing room only, which was all I could afford. I had absorbed many arias, overtures and other selections from these operas, so it was of great benefit to me.

"*Goodwill Court* required people to come to the studio and tell their troubles to A. L. Alexander. The show became popular because of its shock value. Certain things came out when it was local in origin. It was difficult to understand how these people could talk, but there was no audience in the studio, and they spoke as if they were talking to someone who could comfort them. That was Alexander's big idea for success.

"He used actual judges who would give their advice. (The program eventually went off the air because the Bar Association objected to free advice being given on the air.) However, because of the shock value, the program went national. Chase and Sanborn took it to NBC. When it came to the national hook-up, they had to worry about the shock effect, because of the result such disclosures would have on the smaller, unsophisticated communities throughout the country. When it lost its shock value, it lost its appeal.

"I became connected with radio station WINS which did not own an organ, so I had to go around to several places to find good organs to use on remote broadcasts. They had no electronics then. But they had to promote organ programs in this way, I was taken around to many places, including the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel which had a big 4-manual Moller in the ballroom and a 3-manual one in

the Peacock Room. Another place was the Barbizon Hotel for women.

"Some programs we did at the Roxy Theatre were broadcast from the rotunda which had a little balcony on the right side, housing a Kimball. We broadcast remote control and I had the earphones on so I could get my cues from the studio. We usually went on the air when there were many people standing in the rotunda, awaiting entrance to the auditorium. It was a very welcome sound as it took their minds off their feet. The theatre got music in exchange for the use of the organ. We also announced the theatre's programs over the air, and that publicity also helped get free use of the organ.

"The Kimball in the Roxy broadcasting studio was also used for many programs. The organ was similar to the one on the rotunda balcony. At the time I was using these instruments, they didn't use the organ in the theatre auditorium anymore.

"The Center Theatre in New York was the second theatre Roxy built in the Rockefeller Complex, the Radio City Music Hall being the first. They were a block apart and the Center had the identical presentation policy, though on a smaller scale. The Center had two organists who worked five days a week and needed someone for the next two days to close the house and to regulate the amount of hours they were allowed to work. The organists were Alexander Richardson, who played at the Music Hall for many years, and Betty Gould. I came in as the third organist and at the same time was holding a job at the Gay Blades Ice Rink on 52nd Street, playing a Hammond which had come to the fore.

"I alternated my 2½-hour session at the rink with my stint at the Center Theatre where I played that gorgeous 4-manual Wurlitzer. In the course of going back and forth, it wasn't easy to alternate between pipes and the electronic, but the Center Theatre engagement was a great experience. The final number I'd play would be an exit march around 1 a.m., and while the place was being cleaned, I'd play into the dawn hours, forgetting the world outside. This was indeed one of the highlights of my playing career. What a wonderful instrument!"

In 1944, Rose Diamond settled in

Los Angeles. One of her more recent assignments was to play the part of a helpless-looking, near-sighted organist in a scene in the movie *The Graduate*. Though we can understand casting Rose as an organist, we can't visualize this vivacious lady as "helpless" or "near-sighted." Indeed, she keeps in trim by working out at a health club's gym and pool regularly. She explains how she got into this movie:

"Director Mike Nichols created this character and that's why it didn't end up on the cutting room floor. I guess I did a good enough job so that I was paid as a bit player instead of as a musician. It was a great experience, but arising at 5:30 a.m. daily to report in at Paramount by 7 a.m., and being transported to the church location, was most fatiguing by the third day. I had five days of this, and played the scene only one day. Everyone gets made up daily in case the director decides to do the scene again.

"The nice part of it is that I will collect residuals for the five days. No one cared *how* I played the organ. I merely fitted the director's conception of the part. It's such a wonderful way to make a living!"

Rose Diamond is tremendously happy over the renaissance of the theatre organ. She has been a performer for over 45 years, and has successfully bridged the golden age of the instrument with its revival, having played for West Coast ATOS chapters on several occasions.

"This has been a part of my autobiography from those days when the theatre organ spoke a language all could understand. ATOS has done a great service in trying to preserve the nostalgia of a *great era*, and it will live on for those in the future in a new medium, who can also enjoy it, as an instrument on the concert circuit." □

Rose (right) talks over old times in Gotham with Ann Leaf at an LA Chapter party. (Bob Hill Photo)

