

THE FRED GIBBONS STORY

by George R. Hockmeyer

It has been at least four decades since a pipe organ has sounded in a Houston, Texas, movie theatre. But Houstonians who were around back in the thirties certainly recall the pleasure of listening to singing organist Fred Gibbons at the Wurlitzer console in the now-gone Texan Theatre in downtown Houston.

However, when theatre organs left Houston many years ago, Fred didn't go with them. He stayed behind, but his musical career flourished unabated. Since the demise of the silent films and later the once popular "organ sing-alongs" at the movies, Fred Gibbons played pipe organs in churches and pianos and electronic organs on both radio and TV, in supper clubs, for style shows, wedding receptions, gala balls and for all kinds of Houston society functions, and at the prestigious Houston Club.

I have been a fan of Fred Gibbons for most of my life. Several friends and relatives who knew him and also knew of my interest in theatre organs offered to introduce me to him, but somehow never got around to it.

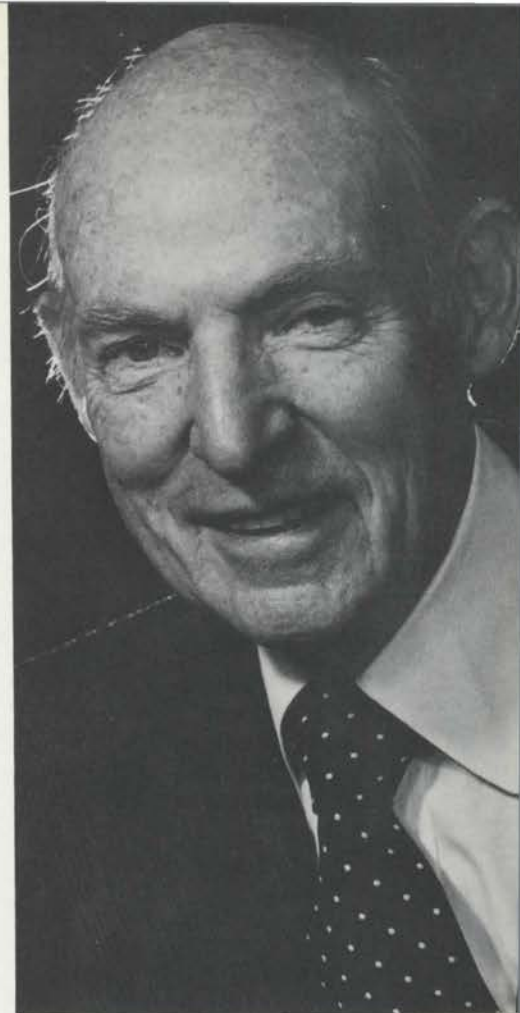
A few years ago at Houston's Pipe Organ Pizza I was covering an ATOS open console session with my camera and engaged Fred in a conversation while he posed for a picture. We became fast friends when we found we shared interests in early Houston theatres and, of course, in theatre organs. Each had information to exchange, but the crowning blow came when we exchanged addresses. We had been near neighbors for 25 years.

Although Fred Gibbons was not a native of Houston, he lived in the city longer than most Houstonians. He

was born on the last day of the year 1907 in the little upstate New York town of Gloversville, a town known to film historians as a place where Samuel Goldfish (later Goldwyn) once served his apprenticeship in a glove factory.

Situated in the foothills of the Adirondacks 45 miles northwest of Albany and with a population of never more than 30,000, Gloversville, originally known as Stump City, was the center of the glove industry in the American colonies. Glove manufacturing began there around 1760 and by 1825 the industry was firmly established. More than half the townspeople worked at one of the many glove factories or glove-related industries there, and they were so proud of their product that in 1828 they named their town after it. Years later they even named the finest of their two movie theatres the "Glove." It was at the Glove Theatre that young Fred Gibbons became a proficient silent movie organist. Many years later, in 1939, the world premiere of John Ford's classic film *Drums Along the Mohawk* was held at the Glove.

There were seven children in the Gibbons family, one girl and six boys, and Fred was the youngest boy. The parents, both of whom were first generation English, were undoubtedly musically oriented, for all seven children were given piano instruction. When Fred was about twelve and had been studying piano for a year, his teacher dismissed him as a pupil because of his apparent lack of interest and his unwillingness to practice. But Fred's distaste for the drudgery of piano lessons didn't signify a lack of feeling for music. Quite the contrary, for soon after his



Fred Gibbons (recent photo).
(George R. Hockmeyer Photo)

lessons were terminated he and four other boys from school organized a sharp little combo they called "The Jazzy Five," with Fred as the leader. He played the piano but also doubled on the saxophone and baritone horn.

The group was soon recognized as the best dance band around. They played for their high school dances and proms and in the summer at a nearby lake resort, Sacandaga Park. They were so well received at the park by the dancers and picnickers that they were asked to return for three more summers.

The other four members of the band were a little older than Fred and were already wearing long pants. Back in those days boys Fred's age wore what were called "britches" and Fred was no exception. But sometime around 1922, when Fred was about 14 and beginning to be a little sensitive about wearing short pants, he and his band won the first prize in a statewide amateur contest. His winning number was "Dardenella," and this launched him in his theatrical music career.

So with his first "big money" he went down and bought a pair of long

pants and then took "The Jazzy Five" to a number of small towns throughout New York state, playing for dances and giving concerts. Once they travelled as far as Seabright, New Jersey, a resort on the Atlantic seaboard. Looking back on those great days, Fred recalled that they really earned more good times than money.

They played one engagement at Geneva, New York, a job which lasted all summer. In the fall the school authorities arranged for young Fred to attend classes at Geneva High School in exchange for his teaching music to the other pupils. During this time he organized the first Geneva High School Band.

By 1925 Fred and his band were playing for college dances all over New York state. He was 17 when a Catholic priest happened to hear him at the piano and told him he had a touch for the organ. Fred had heard organs in churches but never in a movie theatre, and he didn't think organ music was quite his style.

Returning to Gloversville around the end of the year, he found that the Hippodrome Theatre there had installed a Style E 2/7 Wurlitzer pipe organ. When he heard it he was immediately won over and arranged to meet the organist, who was in need of a relief man. Fred got the job after receiving a few pointers on registration and the use of the pedals, and it wasn't long before he decided the priest was right. He *did* have a touch for the organ and he concentrated on this instrument for many years.

In 1927 the Glove Theatre installed a Style 190 2/8 Wurlitzer, and Fred moved over there and started playing full time. It was during these years that he started making regular trips to New York City to take in the



"The Jazzy Five" around 1922. Fred Gibbons, second from right, is wearing his first long pants.
(Photo courtesy of Fred Gibbons)



The Fred R. Gibbons Society Orchestra in 1929. Fred Gibbons is in first row at the right.
(Photo courtesy of Fred Gibbons)

Gloversville (N.Y.) High School band in 1926. Fred Gibbons in back row, third from left.
(Photo courtesy of Fred Gibbons)



musicals and to hear Jesse Crawford at the Paramount. Fred's eyes lighted up when he talked about "the great Crawford style." He would try to get a seat in the front row at the Paramount so he could watch Crawford's deft fingerwork and perfectly-timed registration changes. "Compared to Crawford," Fred remarked, "all the other theatre organists I had heard sounded like piano players who were playing the organ as though it were a piano."

By 1931 silent films had long given way to sound movies and the theatres in Groversville, like those most everywhere else, had abandoned the organ. Fred felt sure his career as an organist was coming to an end. But by chance he met someone from Houston, Texas, who told him that organs were still being played in some of the Houston theatres.

There were two first-run theatres where organs were being used in downtown Houston in 1931. Leo Weber was playing a Wurlitzer at the Metropolitan and Roger Hail was playing a Robert-Morton at the Loew's State. Both theatres were on Main Street, which was Houston's main street, and they were right next door to one another. A few blocks down Main Street in the direction of Buffalo Bayou and around the corner on Rusk stood another first-run house, the Majestic. This theatre featured regular stage shows with the movies but its organ, a Kilgen, had long been silent.

The Majestic, opened in 1923, was the pride of Karl Hoblitzelle, president of a theatre chain known as The

Interstate Amusement Company. The theatre had been designed by architect John Eberson, a man already known to Houstonians as the architect of Houston's first real skyscraper, the Esperson Building.

When Eberson heard that Hoblitzelle was planning a new movie palace for Houston, he immediately contacted him and showed him plans for a revolutionary new idea in theatre design. He called his new idea "the atmospheric theatre" and it was indeed revolutionary. There were twinkling stars and drifting clouds projected on the ceiling and the interior walls of the auditorium resembled the exterior walls of an Italian villa. Hoblitzelle liked the idea and built the Majestic according to Eberson's plans. The idea was later copied in theatres all over the world.

The Majestic, which was torn down a few years ago, is described and pictured in the late Ben Hall's "The Best Remaining Seats." Hall noted that the theatre was not air conditioned in 1923 but this was an error. It actually was air conditioned, as were most of Houston's theatres at that time. The alternative would have been to shut the theatres down from May to October because of Houston's hot and humid summers.

But Fred Gibbons was not destined to play at any of these major downtown theatres in Houston. His friend from Texas put him in touch with Will Horwitz, a dynamic Houston entrepreneur and showman who owned at that time three second-run

theatres just off Main Street. These playhouses were known as "Will Horwitz's Homefolks Theatres" and the newest and finest was the Texan, which boasted a Style 235 3/11 Wurlitzer, for which an organist was needed.

Fred wrote to Horwitz giving information about himself and his musical background and he promptly received a wire from Houston offering him a job as organist at the Texan.

Sound films had arrived, but so had the Great Depression, and some theatres were using the organ to help get people to come to the movies. And some theatres, such as the Texan, featured "organ sing-alongs" in which the audience joined in with the organ and sang as the lyrics were flashed on the screen. Some of the lyrics were comical parodies of well-known songs and Fred became quite adept at composing them.

So in March of 1931 Fred Gibbons boarded a train in New York for the far-away wilds of Houston. But when he arrived several days later he saw neither cowboys, sagebrush, nor cactus. Instead, what lay before him was a bustling Southern town of about 300,000 with wide, paved streets and a friendly atmosphere which he immediately liked. On his opening day at his new job he was billed as "Fred Gibbons, the New York Organist at the Texan Console." In less than three months *The Houston Post* was to run a story about this gifted musician and mentioned that during his short time at the Texan Theatre he had gained a large following.

The second best theatre in the Horwitz chain was the Iris. Originally known as the Travis Theatre (it was on Travis Street), Will Horwitz bought and remodeled it around 1920. He then re-named it the Iris after his daughter, who was about Fred's age and who later became Fred's wife. The Iris was the flagship of the Horwitz theatres until Will built and opened the Texan in 1927.

Will Horwitz was a highly visible personality in Houston during the depression years. Certain Saturday mornings were set aside at his theatres when the newsboys of the city were admitted free. Of course, the kids showed up in droves. One of Fred's non-musical duties was to help keep these boys in line and see

The Glove Theatre on its closing day, November 28, 1971.

(Photo courtesy of Bob Luey, Groversville Sunday Leader)



that no one got trampled.

During the Christmas holidays Horwitz would take over the City Auditorium and hold a huge party for the needy of the city, and he saw to it that there were presents for everyone. He erected a gigantic tent on the site of the present city hall so transients and other homeless people would have a place to sleep.

He opened a soup kitchen near his Texan Theatre, and every Wednesday the theatre had a "tin can matinee" which anyone could attend providing he brought a can of food. Fred recalled that on these days the cans were stacked to the ceiling in the theatre lobby.

There seemed to be no end to Fred's father-in-law's interests. The flamboyant showman was expanding into all sorts of fields, both theatrical and non-theatrical, and after a couple of years he turned the Texan over to Fred to manage. But Fred had to play the organ, too. A typical day included playing and singing a few songs before the feature film at each performance, conducting rehearsals for the stage shows, booking films, writing publicity, judging the frequently-held amateur contests, and keeping the staff in line.

In the meantime, Horwitz decided to build a new and larger theatre directly across the street from the Texan. This theatre, the Uptown, opened in 1935 and it was connected to the Texan by a tunnel which ran under the street. This was the first such tunnel in Houston and the "homefolks" were quite impressed.

Today downtown Houston is criss-crossed with numerous under-the-street tunnels, and one can visit practically all of the major high-rise buildings without seeing a single automobile. But Will Horwitz had the distinction for having built the first one.

A stairway descending from the lobby of the Uptown Theatre led to a coffee shop and nearby was a flower shop stocked with blooms from the Horwitz Gardens between Houston and Galveston. Then there was an arcade which led to the tunnel under Capitol Avenue and at the end of the tunnel was a stairway leading to the lobby of the Texan. Another tunnel went under the corner of the block to the Iris.

Fred's theatre organ career ended abruptly in August 1936 when a fire

of unknown origin destroyed the Wurlitzer console. The remains of the organ were sold for parts. On special occasions an electronic organ was placed on the stage and Fred played it, but the pipe sound was forever gone from the Texan.

In the early forties, while he was still managing the Texan, he was playing the piano on an early morning radio program called "Eye Openers." From time to time he played theme music on a Hammond organ for a variety of radio programs, and once when the popular "Dunninger Program" was broadcast nationwide from Houston, Fred supplied the music on a Hammond.

During the War he assembled an orchestra and furnished the music for Houston's Stage Door Canteen. He also became a regular at the Hammond organ on a daily noon radio show.

In 1945 Fred left the theatre business. Will Horwitz had died and Paramount took over the Horwitz theatres. He then concentrated on his radio work and at one time or another he served as musical director

at most of Houston's radio stations. He played with the Houston Symphony four times and fondly remembered being directed by the symphony's famous guest conductor, Leopold Stokowski. After his time with radio he sold organs for a while, and then went to work for oil wildcatter Glenn McCarthy playing a Hammond organ at McCarthy's swank Cork Club.

In the mid-forties Iris died after a long illness, leaving him with a daughter, Audrey Jean. Later he met and married his second wife, Lorraine. There are two children from this marriage. Pamela and Billy. Pamela Gibbons Bray is living in Atlanta, where she is Associate Curator of the High Museum of Art, but it is Billy Gibbons who gets the most publicity in the news media because of his eight gold and two platinum records. Billy is the founder and lead guitarist of the well-known rock group known as ZZ Top. So, in spite of a wide difference in musical style between father and son, it is obvious that music runs in the Gibbons family. □

The Texan Theatre in Houston.

(Photo by Bob Bailey Studios, Inc., Houston, Texas)

