

# The Virginia Cox Story

by  
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and  
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Virginia Cox at the Moller Organ in the Philadelphia Metropolitan Opera House. Circa 1937.



Virginia Cox, later Virginia Smith and Virginia Kahapea, passed away August 18, 1981 in Honolulu. She had played at numerous theatres throughout the country in her varied life, and spent the last forty years in Hawaii.

Born in Conneaut, Ohio in 1898, Virginia's first contact with music was in kindergarten. She came home and picked out on the piano the songs she had learned on the first day of school. Her grandmother thought she should start music lessons, so, though not yet six years old, she began two lessons a week from Donna Ward. Lessons continued until she was 16, the last two years in classical piano. She perhaps was dreaming of a concert someday.

When she was 17 she was playing at the local motion picture houses, the Theatorium and La Grand. At the former, she played a piano and accompanied a violinist; the second theatre had a photoplayer and later a Bartola. She had not taken any formal training on the organ, but had learned to play at her church by sneaking in (at age 11) with a friend, who pumped the bellows while she played. The church later got an electric-blown organ but locked the console, so she was out of luck.

Her grandmother died as Virginia was to go to college, so instead, in 1916, she started playing professionally. She joined the Musicians' Union in Ashdivilla, 14 miles from her home town. Two years later she went to San Francisco. As Virginia tells it, "After I put my transfer in to the union I went to a building where they had about six organs on one floor for practice purposes. I was practicing up on some things there and someone heard me and asked if I would go to Porterville and play. The man who had been playing there had been working on his car, and somehow or other, gasoline had burned his hands quite badly. I spent about ten months in Porterville; this was at the Monache Theatre, and it was my first exposure to a Robert-Morton." At the Monache, a six- or seven-hundred-seat house, she played spotlight solos on the two-manual Morton. "From there I went home; my family had driven out to spend the winter but changed their minds and went back for Thanksgiving and I went back with them. I didn't get back to California for a

couple of years."

While in Cleveland, Ohio, she played her first Hope-Jones Wurlitzer, perhaps in the Strand Theatre, she recalls. "It was a big thrill." She also played at an unusual theatre at Euclid Avenue and Prospect Street: "It had two entrances; one was at a lower level than the other. If you bought a ticket from one entrance you could see the picture at that theatre, then walk into the next level and see that picture for nothing." She then went to the 105th Street Theatre for a year and a half, to the Mall Theatre, and others.

After two years in Ohio, she returned to California in 1922, to Los Angeles this time. She worked at the Mission Theatre, owned by Max Sennet. It was a beautiful theatre, done in a Spanish style, with a Robert-Morton. C. Sharpe Minor played there, and Virginia played on Sundays. He gave her many pointers, and she imitated him and also substituted for him for six weeks. Once, while playing, she looked up and saw Max Sennet in the wings watching her. "Of course, I was pretty nervous," she admitted.

In 1923 she worked at the Superba Theatre in downtown Los Angeles. It had maybe a thousand seats and was owned by Universal Pictures and they showed their own pictures there. Also, she knew the organist at the Pantages and worked there now and then as well. Her pay at the Superba was, as always, above scale, and she lived at the Hollywood Hotel. She could pick the jobs she wanted, and moved around to get better ones.

Her next move was to the 2200-seat Raymond Theatre (later renamed the Crown) in Pasadena. It was a stock theatre, with a 20-piece orchestra and a 3/11 Style 235 Wurlitzer. Everyone dressed in evening clothes; she wore evening gowns (paid for by herself), and the orchestra leader wore tails. She would play a number, then the orchestra would play, then both together. Many great actors played stock at the Raymond, and many were guests. Bernice Berwin, J. Anthony Smythe, and Harold Peary were part of the stock company, the King-Smith Players.

Virginia was there for about a year and a half, and married the leading man, Norman Field. Then they went



to San Francisco, where he played at George Eby's Fulton Theatre. She played at the T & D Theatre in Oakland for a while, then the Casino, St. Francis, and, in 1927, the Pantages. A year and a half later it was sold to the Orpheum circuit, but she stayed on for a total of nearly five years.

"When I went to the Orpheum, Don George was there. He was playing top shift and I was playing the second shift. After I had been there several months he went to the Islands (Hawaii) and I took top shift. I played top shift usually, but there were a couple of times when Rodney Pantages brought in a couple of his organ friends. They would play about a month and then I would go back to my regular shift."

Virginia also played piano for vaudeville acts, and sometimes played piano in orchestras. She remembers that there were about equal numbers of male and female organists then.

Virginia's second marriage was in about 1930 to violinist and orchestra leader Vinton La Fererra. They lived on Telegraph Hill in a home on, naturally, La Fererra Terrace. At her

home, Virginia made many rhythm instruments for her husband, and watched Coit Tower and both bridges being built.

She played at the Golden Gate, Imperial, and Warfield theatres for short engagements — fill-ins. She did a radio program in Oakland, sponsored by the Oakland Tribune, playing a Harmonium with an orchestra. Rodney Pantages later gave her the Harmonium.

While playing at the Warfield, around 1935, she also played background music for "Count Renaldo," a radio program her husband did. He came up with story ideas, and Virginia and a writer edited them. She remembers rushing from the Warfield to catch a small air ferry to Oakland for the broadcast.

"I played Hammonds from the first time they came out to the West coast. In 1937, while on vacation in Los Angeles, I noticed in a paper that they were having a formal opening for the Hammond at a local music company. I spoke to Lee Haggart of Hammond; he said he was taking the organ to San Francisco the following

week — the symphony wanted to try it out for one note in one piece. I was invited to be backstage at the San Francisco Opera House on the following Tuesday. When the organ was delivered, Lee asked me if I would like to play it. So I played the first note on the first Hammond in San Francisco."

In 1935 and 1940 Virginia travelled all over the United States. In 1937 she played the huge Moller at the Philadelphia Metropolitan Opera House (also known as Stanley's Metropolitan Theatre) for about a month. "It had about six manuals and a 64' stop in the pedal. I felt like a midget. I would lift my hands as high as I could just to put the tablets down. Rows and rows of them. It shook the whole building and it was beautiful. That was the biggest organ I ever played." Actually, the organ had only four manuals, but Virginia was very small and the console towered over her. And it did bristle with tablets, 421 of them. She composed "The Goddess of Liberty" on that organ, and wrote a lot of music during that time. The opera house

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She played on and off from 1940 to 1942, when she was divorced. In early 1943 she married Milton Walter "Pete" Smith. He worked for Pan American Airlines, and they wanted to transfer him to Hawaii. "This was during the war and Pan Am was under the Navy. The Navy rule prohibited families from coming over (to Hawaii). He would have had to come over alone and he wouldn't go; he kept resisting them.

"Finally one morning we heard an Army officer on the radio trying to recruit people to work in G-2 Intelligence at Fort Shafter in Honolulu, so I said, facetiously, 'Well, maybe I'll go to Hawaii on my own and work for the Army.' After my husband left for work, I presented myself to this officer in the Federal Building and told him, because he asked, why I wanted to go to Hawaii. When he asked what I could do I told

him I was a professional musician. He asked if I had any office experience and I said no. He said, 'Well, if you can pass the civil service examination I will send you over.' So I took the examination and was told I had passed by the skin of my teeth. So I went home — I belonged to the Army: they had to know my whereabouts 24 hours a day."

Two months later, in 1944, she was on the *Permanente*, an old cement ship, which took ten days to make the crossing. She arrived a month ahead of her husband; when he finally arrived he wanted to know why she hadn't found them a home. He started looking himself and realized how hard they were to find. It was two months before they got their apartment on Kaiulani Avenue in Waikiki.

Virginia was working at Fort Shafter on top secret things — she couldn't tell her husband about her

work. She was on temporary civil service and they wanted her to become permanent, but she didn't want it. She went to the Princess Theatre and introduced herself to the organist, Earle Bond. Then she saw Mr. Mitchell, the manager, and asked if they needed anybody. They did. Don George had just left for California, so Virginia and Earle alternated. When Earle left Virginia continued, staying almost two years. She even substituted for Edwin Sawtelle at the Waikiki Theatre for two and a half months. "Sawtelle never let anyone touch the organ at the Waikiki. When Gaylord Carter came through during the war he asked if he could play after the show and he was refused." Both theatres had 4/16 Robert-Mortons, built in 1921. The Waikiki organ had been originally installed in the Hawaii Theatre downtown, and was moved in the late thirties.

At the end of the war, and while playing at the Princess, Virginia had a radio program on KGMB for a year and a half, seven days a week, thirty minutes a night, at midnight. At 11:30 every evening a taxi took her to the studio. She played requests on a Hammond and received a lot of mail, especially from Australia and New Zealand. She was offered a job as a cocktail organist at Gibson's Bar on Hotel Street. "I hesitated about accepting the offer as I had never done that kind of work. At Gibson's I used a Hammond and played there for almost five years. A sailor came in one night and asked, 'Can I buy you a drink?' I said, 'No, I don't drink.' 'Well, you looked like you did,' was his reply. I got such a kick out of that I've never forgotten it." Gibson's was quite a change for Virginia. "If I didn't get at least a dozen proposals, it was a bad week."

After Gibson's, it was Officer's Clubs, NCO Clubs, Air Force Clubs, Ciro's Restaurant, the Tradewinds, the Zebra Room, and three assignments at the Pearl City Tavern. She was asked to go to Australia and Minneapolis to open theatres, but she refused. From 1955 to 1960 she played at Kawaiahao Church. Also, with her Hammond and Lowrey Festival, she played fashion shows, weddings, funerals, conventions, and the CIRCUS!

"Playing the circus was the highlight of my career. There was an

Virginia Cox at the Robert-Morton Organ in the Princess Theatre, Honolulu, Circa 1944.





eight-piece band and the organist made it sound twice that big because it was loud and fast. I once played for a Japanese circus. They had 52 performers, and not one of them could speak a word of English. We played three weeks at the Civic Auditorium and then took it over to Maui and the Big Island (Hawaii). I never enjoyed anything as much before in my life.

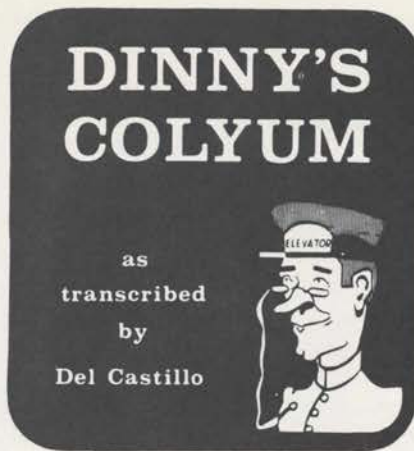
"One afternoon I came in between shows with the conductor, a very remarkable, handsome young man, very powerfully built. He was the manager of the show and he did a trapeze act also. They built a huge apparatus on Fort Street near King, and had him do part of his act to draw the people. After the show was over I took him driving and he wanted to drive so I took him up into a residential section. I found out later from the interpreters that it had been the first time he had ever driven a car. I guess he had watched often enough to learn how to turn the wheel. It was the dream of his life to drive a car, and he did. And he did all right, too."

In 1946 she and her husband adopted a three-week-old baby boy and named him Peter. Pete Smith later passed away and in 1962 Virginia married her son's real father, Joe Kahapea.

"I have forgotten a number of places. It was a colorful time and I enjoyed every minute of it. I retired as an organist when I had my two accidents; one on my hand and then my legs. That put me on the shelf."

But even "on the shelf," Virginia didn't quit; she exercised her hand until she had regained full use of it, although her doctor had said it couldn't be done. She played whenever she got the chance, and in 1973 was the Cameo Artist representing the Aloha (Hawaii) Chapter at the National ATOS Convention in Portland, Oregon.

She moved to the Big Island of Hawaii, near the tourist town of Kona, where she was rather out of touch with civilization, and with few of the modern conveniences that we take to be necessities. But she loved the beauty of the area, the fresh air, the closeness to nature. She occasionally visited Honolulu and played the organs she once knew and still loved. The song had not gone out of her heart. □



Mr. Harry Jenkins, who is a organ player I knowed from way back when I was a-runnin the elyvater at Mr. Walter Jacobs Publishin Company in Boston, has rit me with his shirt tale on fire on acct. he saw a notice about a organ concert that said that The Theatre Pipe Organ is not a Relict of the Silent Film but One of the Most Versatile Instruments Devised by man. Well that dint sound like no insult to me but Mr. Jenkins he dint like to hear the theater organ called a Relick. Mr. Jenkins he went on to say that down his way they is some people who dont want to have silent movies in organ concerts. He thinks most people do want it but they is some who dont.

Well, that sounds reasonable to me. Just like they is some Republick-ans and some Democrats or some Baptists and some Catholicks and like that there. You cant always expect that everybody is a-go-in to think the same way. As for me I am on Mr. Jenkins side. Seems to me every time I hear a organ player play for the silent movies he gets a great hand at the end even when the movie is a stinker. And beleave me some of them old movies is awful corny. But even the corny ones I get a kick out of when the Western hero takes off lick-ity split after the villin and the organ player cuts loose with Hi Ho Silver and like that there. And I am also a sucker for the sentimental ones when the organ player comes on with some sob musick on the Tibia and the Vox Humana and I aint ashamed to say that sometimes I get a good cry out of it, just like I get a good belly laff when Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton they fall down and the organ goes Gr-r-r-oomph.

I have to admit that all the organ players who are fittin musick to the

silent movies aint always up to it. They is some who jest kind of dribble along like they are gettin paid by the note and they think it is a sin not to have some musick a-go-in all the time. And I always get kind of irritated when they is a dog bark or a shot or a train wistle and the organ player dont give out with the bark or the shot or the wistle the first time you see it. I spose maybe it is too much to expect that the player had a chancet to see the movie enough times to know jest when them things was goin to happen, but after all aint that what he is gettin paid for? How long do you think a timpany player would last if he dint get in the first bang on the timpany where it was suppose to be. I will tell you how long he would last. He would last only to the first time the conductor got him in the anty room.

Now that I got steamed up on the subjeck it seems to me that they is more young organ players in concerts who dont know how to play for them the way the old timers like Oliver Wallace and Lew White and Emil Velazco and fellers like that did when I use to listen way back in the 20s when I first begun to go to the movies. When you went into them big movie palaces in the middle of a movie and you hear them great big rich sounds comin out of that big Wurlitzer you knew you was in for a musical treat even if the movie wasnt much good. And them organists, the best ones I mean in Noo York and Chicago and Detroit and Los Angeles, they knew how to use musick to goose up the movie. Why wouldnt they? They been doin it every day foe years, and by the time a movie got to the last day they had all them cues down so pat you could even tell what was comin if you had your eyes shut. Yup, them was the Good Old Days. □

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