

# BOB HESS

## Much-Traveled Theatre Organist

by Lloyd E. Klos

Through the years, a number of ATOS members have unofficially served as "stringers" for the writer, researching material, conducting interviews, etc. In early 1977, Marvin and Jean Lautzenheiser were hosts to former theatre organist Bob Hess who was vacationing in the Virginia area. After a session on the Lautzenheiser home installation, they persuaded Bob to put a resume of his career onto a cassette tape, and the following, interspersed with material from faded newspaper clippings, is the edited result.

**JL** Bob, we're primarily interested in what happened in the "good old days." First of all, when were you born?

**BH** I was born in 1903.

**JL** How did you get interested in theatre organ?

**BH** I had my own high school dance band in which I played piano. I wanted to be a doctor, so I went to college, playing piano in a large dance orchestra, on my way through. The schedule was three nights a week, getting home at three in the morning and then arising for a 7:45 class. This was at Michigan State University in Lansing, with its bitter winters. It was more than the human body could take and I became so ill with sinus trouble that I had to be operated on twice. It left me very weak, which precluded my going back to school. This, I believe, was in 1924.

It so happened that the father of the drummer in our orchestra was the director and violinist of the pit orchestra in the State Theatre in Pontiac, Michigan, a picture-and-vaudeville house. Directly across the street from the State was the large Oakland

Theatre which played all the "A" pictures, and they had a tremendous 3/11 Barton. In those days, the organist played the entire picture. A cue sheet was sent with the picture and each organist had a music library. Scores were arranged to play the pictures.

My drummer friend told his father of my misfortune and the latter asked that I come and see him. He introduced me to Walter Rolls, the manager of the Oakland, who asked that I play the organ for him.

I said, "I don't know anything about playing the organ; I play a dance band piano." He said that it was a sort of dare. So I sat down and the minute I did, it felt good to me;

unusual but wonderful. It was as if an entirely different world opened for me. This was in the morning before the show opened, and I fiddled around with it. The more I fiddled, the better I liked it. After a half hour or so, the manager came down, tapped me on the shoulder and said, "That's enough. Come on back." He asked me when I could go to work.

**JL** That was a fast audition!

**BH** It was! I answered that I wasn't equipped to do this. He thought I was, and I told him, "In that case, I'm ready to go to work right now."

**JL** Same day?

**BH** Same day. Of course, in those days they were short of organists. Many lacked something, and to this

Bob Hess brings back the good old days at the Lautzenheiser console.

(Hess collection)



day, I don't know what that "something" was. It was a spark, or talent or something else.

Each theatre organization sent scouts out and they'd rob each other of good organists. One day, I received a phone call from Detroit, asking me to come for an audition at the old Capitol Theatre which was later renamed the Paramount. It had a large 4-manual Wurlitzer and Don Miller was the organist. If ever there were a fine organist, Don Miller certainly was it! He was also the one who discovered me.

He had bought an Oakland automobile which was made in Pontiac and had gone to take delivery of it from the assembly line. While he had two hours to kill, he visited theatres to scout organists as customary. If he found someone with possibilities, he'd report back to his employers in Detroit who invited the organist for an audition. Which is what happened to me while in Pontiac.

He asked 12 other organists to play this and that, and as it was getting late, I had to get back to my job in Pontiac. I tapped Don on the shoulder and told him I had to get back. He told me, "that's been taken care of; I've saved you for last for a particular reason." The rest of the organists left after leaving their names and addresses for future contact.

He then told me to "get up there and play the organ as I heard you in the Oakland Theatre when I was waiting for my new car. You have a certain peculiar ballad rhythm style which I like and never heard before. I can't play it myself, but am going to learn how by listening to you. I can tell you now that before this audition started, you were already picked. We want you to work for our company."

I told him I couldn't right away, that I had to go back to Pontiac. "No, you don't have to go back except to the hotel and get your clothes, etc." So, I joined the new company and started playing at the Adams Theatre, a house which showed long-run pictures. I remember distinctly playing a part of the 1927 picture *Wings*. Much of it was in sound, but some of it was silent which was accompanied by the organ for many weeks. We played *The Singing Fool* and *Sonny Boy* with Al Jolson for four months.

By now, Vitaphone was in, but they kept a number of organists, including myself. We sat around until the bell rang, informing us that something

was wrong in the booth. We'd go down and play the organ until the trouble was corrected.

**JL** That was the Adams Theatre. What was the make of organ?

**BH** I don't remember the make. It had a three-manual console. (Editor's note: Our information tells us that it was a Hilgreen-Lane.)

**JL** How long were you at the Adams?

**BH** It was fairly long, as I played one of the Jolson pictures for four months in very cold weather. But people lined up around the block to see the picture.

**JL** Do you remember the admission price?

**BH** It was about 65 cents or so. Nothing like today's prices, but we played to packed houses. I was called one evening after the dinner hour to report at the new Fisher Theatre, which had a big Wurlitzer. I said, "What about my job?" They replied, "We don't know, but you're supposed to 'blow the Fisher organ out.'" The factory technicians were still there, getting the kinks out of the brand new organ before the opening the following Friday evening. This went on day and night; they tuned and voiced, and I played it. I believe it was on a Wednesday that they called me to the back of the theatre where there was a group of well-dressed men. They shook their heads in agreement that I would be the organist to open the Fisher Theatre.

However, I turned it down cold right there because I was young and inexperienced and I just knew I was not ready. However, I did give the Fisher organ its initial workout.

They sent me to the Michigan Theatre, a big downtown house in Detroit, as assistant to Arthur Gutow, a fine organist. This was a deluxe theatre with a big pit orchestra, big stage shows (not vaudeville, but real fine stage shows), and first-run pictures. We came up on the elevator in afternoon or evening clothes and played the finest overtures the masters ever wrote.

**JL** It must have been a thrill.

**BH** It was; it was a different world. That went on for quite some time until I tore up my knee playing baseball. Each theatre had a team, and that's the way we got our exercise. I had to go to New Orleans for an operation by the famous Dr. Finner, chief of orthopedic surgery at Tulane University. It was a real serious operation, because it meant that I'd either be

stiff-legged or normal. The operation was successful, but I didn't walk or play for a year. I went to my father's home in Beaumont, Texas, to recuperate.

The city had a very fine theatre, the 1900-seat Jefferson, with a nice organ. As soon as I was able to get about again, I was offered the job at the Jefferson. We used to broadcast from the theatre after the last show, and employed three or four ushers to answer telephone requests. They'd mark the numbers of slips of paper which were handed up to me. In those days, for some reason or other, we'd always carry a library in our mind, and it seems we could remember anything and everything which had ever been written. That was a lot of hard work, but also fun. I was next sent in 1930 to Houston's Metropolitan Theatre which was a much more elaborate house."

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A column in the local press heralded the arrival of the "blond and curly-headed youngster who will be featured in the stage show program with his organologues." He had played

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the overtures for several days and was worked into the spotlight-solo portion with song medlies. Noted organist Harold Ramsay had a stint at the Metropolitan and helped Bob arrange a kiddie organ club which met every Saturday morning.

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**BH** I was there for some time, doing much of what I had done in Beaumont, plus spotlight solos and accompanying the bouncing ball for sing-alongs. As the silents were gone, the organist was a featured attraction. He had to put on a 12- to 14-minute concert, either accompanying the bouncing ball or showing his expertise with solos. I also sat in with the stage band, playing piano, on occasion.

After the Texas stint, I was sent to Atlanta's Paramount Theatre where I played for a while, followed by a tenure of five years at the Capitol Theatre in that city. Then I was sent to places such as Newport News to open a new theatre, amid the gold and glitter.

**JL** Did you open or play the organ in the Newport News Paramount?

**BH** That was the theatre in which I opened a Barton.

(Editor's Note: This is the organ which was re-installed in the Virginia Theatre in Alexandria, and is now in storage.)

**BH** I'll tell you something which happened at Newport News. I was up to stage level, playing a solo when the air hose fell off. Here I was, stuck in the air and couldn't get down using the elevator! I had to climb down as best I could. Never will forget that one! Then they sent me over to Charlottesville, Virginia, to open a new Paramount Theatre there. This was in 1932 and the organ was a Wurlitzer.

**JL** Were you hired by the Paramount people?

**BH** At this time, yes. When I got word to go to Newport News, or Nashville or wherever, to open a new theatre, there was never any question; I just went. They put me up in a hotel for three weeks beforehand while the publicity appeared in the papers. It was interesting and altogether a new world to live in. In 1934, I played the Olympia Theatre in Miami.

**JL** I want to go back a bit and ask a couple questions. You said you were in Atlanta. Did you know Bob Van Camp?

**BH** Oh, yes. He still plays the "Mighty Mo" at the Fox, which is a

tremendous organ. However, you must understand that I've always been a Wurlitzer man in my preference. I played the Fox, but not officially. The other organs had long gone, but the Moller has been saved. While in Atlanta, I had a 15-minute morning program, six days a week, over WGST, the show being sponsored by Rogers Grocery Stores.

**JL** Moving to Newport News, do you know who played the Barton after you left? Was it a lady by the name of Gladys Lyle?

**BH** I remember my successor was a tall, skinny boy.

**JL** You traveled often about this time. Was it mostly for opening theatres?

**BH** Well, for quite some time that was true. I made a slight error before. After the Capitol in Atlanta, I was sent to Durham, North Carolina to the Center Theatre, which had a three-manual Robert-Morton. This was for North Carolina Theatres Co., but there were divisions of Paramount all over the country.

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From clippings provided by Bob Hess: The Center Theatre in Durham was opened on December 16, 1938, with the pledge of "supreme and varied entertainment" for the public. The house was the first theatre to introduce "The Center Hour" which included the popular "Quotation of the Day."

The Center was also the first theatre in the Carolinas to introduce the pipe organ as a regular feature. The first organist was Ted Crawford who had a six-month tenure. During the summer of 1939, the organ was idle, but starting in October, Bob Hess was installed at the console.

According to a write-up in the *Durham Herald-Sun*, Bob thought up many of his parodies for his sing-alongs while in the morning shower. "He makes up his theatre programs through written requests, which he says, are surprisingly many and overwhelmingly for songs written in the old style."

"Theatre patrons don't want new songs, unless they are unusually popular, like the current 'South of the Border,'" says Bob. "Folks are surprisingly timid about singing. I don't have much trouble getting young people to join in a song, but middle-aged people who need to forget their troubles, won't sing."

"I played eight years in Atlanta.

Often, I played to packed houses, but I seldom got a peep out of them. Certainly, Durham is different, and the older folks did join the fun and sing.

"The canned music which came in with sound pictures has accustomed people to sit inertly in movies, just watching the flicks. They don't participate as they used to.

"Bob emphasized that he cannot sing well. He has never joined in any community sing programs because he does not think much of his voice. He is a modest gentleman, who does not consider himself a great organist, but admits an organist must be good to survive the inroads the sound movies have made in the profession. Thousands of theatre organists have gone into other professions.

"Perhaps I, too, would now be selling bonds or insurance except that the business world shows people in my profession such an unfriendly face and makes such uncomplimentary remarks about our intelligence that as long as I can stay in the theatre business, I will. The pay is good.

He takes a good deal of trouble rehearsing his weekly program. His chief difficulty is in the matter of pitching songs so they can be sung by the audience. He sings each song himself and if he can sing it with complicated variations, most anyone can.

"I don't want any applause from the audience. All I want them to do is sing. That's thanks enough."

During his Durham stint, he also broadcast over WDNC, five days a week.

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**BH** Durham is the center of Duke University and the boys had a habit of making it pretty tough for an organist. However, in my college days, I belonged to Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity, which was considered about the best, and when they found out I was one of the boys, they let me alone.

I wrote a song for Duke University which was published in their song book, entitled "Song of the Chapel Chimes." The story was that the president of Duke used to walk on campus in the evening with his little son, and while amidst the pine trees, the chimes would ring, making the scene very beautiful and serene. I had heard the chimes often, something clicked in my mind, so I decided to write a song about the chimes. I talked with J. Foster Barnes who was the director of music, and he had the Glee Club re-

cord this with the organ background. Then, we presented it in the theatre. It was quite a presentation, and they even used it on their spring tours.

**JL** When you were traveling, were you married?

**BH** I was married when I went to Charlottesville. There, I featured my wife, who was a very, very attractive girl. I had given her some organ lessons in Atlanta. She played piano also, and we worked up some piano-organ numbers.

When I returned to Duke in 1939, I decided I had enough. They wanted me to go to New York to play but I said no, because I did not like big cities. New York always scared me. I saw the handwriting on the wall as far as the theatre organ went. The theatre company, however, induced me to go into the management end, and in due course, I was sent to New Orleans to the E. B. Richards theatres which were also a part of Paramount-Public. I became district manager until the war came and I enlisted in the finance branch of the Air Corps.

They wanted me back in the theatre business after the war, but I decided upon something else. I got a degree in Chamber of Commerce administration and stayed in that field for some time. Later, I went into real estate from which I retired some years ago.

**JL** Your theatre organ career was from 1924 through 1939. There was a lot of traveling in that period.

**BH** Yes, and I failed to mention a stint in Nashville. Dallas was along

the way. I had a lot of Saturday morning kiddie clubs. In fact, I originated the Young America Club in Durham. It was a howling success and a lot of fun.

So, after I gave up music, I didn't touch pipes or electronics for about 30 years. Always wanted an organ in my home. I finally had a chance to buy a Hammond B-3 in 1965. It's a fine instrument with a Leslie speaker.

But getting to play the computerized pipe organ in your home here was a real thrill, indeed. I had heard indirectly in a Fort Lauderdale music store about this instrument, and that the welcome mat is out to any ex-theatre organists who might drop by. So, by way of friends up here, here I am.

I've had a long-standing dream that I could have a home large enough to house one of the organs I played in the old days, such as the one in the Michigan Theatre in Detroit. Also, a nine-foot Steinway concert grand in a loft by itself, played through the organ console.

**JL** When the article about you appears in THEATRE ORGAN Magazine, there will be people all over the country who will say, "I remember him."

**BH** Well, I don't know that. I never had a name or reputation like Jesse Crawford, although I knew him very well. I knew C. Sharpe Minor, Arthur Gutow, Don Miller and well, I can't remember all of them. Joe Pasternak who became a great producer in Hollywood, was a very fine friend of

mine, back in Detroit. He was a pianist then, a very brilliant musician. He was in the Paramount Music Library at headquarters before becoming a producer to turn out beautiful pictures.

**JL** Any other amusing things which happened to you besides getting stuck on the lift?

**BH** Oh, there were a number of interesting moments when ciphers cropped up. What could you do? It was embarrassing! You'd have to wait until the show was over at midnight when you did your rehearsing and practicing, sometimes until five in the morning. Then, you'd go to your hotel and fall asleep, to awaken in time for the first show at 1:45 p.m. It was an entirely different world, but interesting and I'm glad I lived through it.

**JL** It was unusual because your illness led you into this and were it not for that, just think, we'd have a world without Bob Hess to open theatres.

**BH** I wasn't one of the well-known organists, but I had a circle of fans. I wish I knew where some of them are, and I wish the theatre organ would come back as it was.

**JL** It can't come back as it was in the first great era, but we have many young people getting interested in it as potential artists on the circuit. Our instrument here is often used to entertain the very young. Last Monday, we had 25 who were four and five years of age, sitting here, open-mouthed, and listening intently to the organ. They had never heard such a thing before.

**BH** If I could be a young man again and have the funds to do it, I would rebuild an instrument, and truck it all over the country to play for people in little towns and remote villages where they couldn't conceive of anything like this. I'd give anything to do that. I'm searching right now for an answer for the rest of my life. That's what I'd like to do. I'd have to do a lot of "woodshedding" to bring my playing skills up to par.

It would be great for Bob Hess to realize his ambition as explained above. However, in November 1977, thanks to DTOS member, Richard Weber, he realized a great thrill and honor to play the 4/34 Wurlitzer in the Senate Theatre, the same organ he had played in the Fisher Theatre five decades ago. "I was most pleased that I could still play that organ after 50 years. I hope to return." □

In November 1977, Bob Hess played the DTOS's 4/34 Wurlitzer, fifty years after he had played it in Detroit's Fisher Theatre. (Hess collection)

