

TOURING AMERICA

in Theatre Organ Style

by Donald M. Plenkens

It all began this past March when I left my New Jersey apartment to go to the airport. Incredibly, I left my camera behind, hung on the doorknob where I couldn't possibly forget it — an exquisite example of Murphy's Law (if anything can go wrong, it will). With this rather inauspicious beginning, I began a most enjoyable two-week journey around America to see and play many of the finest organs in Florida, Texas, Colorado and Indiana. By the end of this trip I had recorded over a dozen organs and met dozens of good people.

My first flight took me to Tampa. Two friends, Dottie and Roger Bloom, took me to J. Burns Pizza and Pipes, where I was able to set up mikes and recorder in the balcony and record staff organist Charles Sanford. J. Burns is a great kiddie place with life-sized Disney characters parading around. I had planned to record myself playing the organ the next morning, but instead we headed to the

Central Florida Chapter meeting. After the meeting we were treated to demonstrations of some of the newest Rodgers organs. They sounded great. That evening several of us congregated in the home of Everett and Elaine Bassett, where we were treated to music played on their 2/4 Morton. The console is in the living room, and the two chamber boxes, along with the tuned percussions and toy counter, are in the garage.

It was with some sadness that I left the nice people of Tampa to head for Houston. The next day, after spending a long evening talking to Dick Bryce in his home, I got on the phone and made arrangements to record at the three local pizza parlors.

That evening, when Dick and I got to our first stop, Scooby's Fun Factory, we hauled in the recording equipment. The organist, Steve Schlesing, saw us setting up and announced over the P.A. system that he saw a tape recorder and that was a

NO-NO! (as it is at almost all pizza parlors). We continued setting up, and when he finished playing his set he went to the manager's office to make sure that we had been given permission to record. Then we chatted awhile, and I asked Steve if he would demonstrate the different ranks and tonal capabilities of the instrument. I also asked if I could photograph him as he played, and he consented, asking only that I let him know when I was going to take a picture so the flash wouldn't catch him unawares. The organ is a 3/21 Wurlitzer with all the goodies, lights for each note of the tuned percussions and lights on the "noise makers." The kids seem to eat up the flashing lights. There is a Vibraharp that is just gorgeous, and a Piano that has a nice action from the console.

After most of the screaming kids had left, there were just three customers in the place besides Dick and me, and after Steve finished his last number, he asked me if I wanted to try it out. With a few exceptions, I'm used to having tuned percussions enclosed and under expression, but here everything was out in front, and LOUD! I have the reputation of being the "Quiet Hour" player in the chapter, and here I was confronted with a monster with a Chrysoglott that overpowers a Concert Flute, pedal stops that blow you off the seat even with the shutters closed, and gimmicks all over the place. I had a ball, though, and when I finished Steve came over and chided me for not having "opened her up."

The next day we went to Pizza and Pipes at Memorial Mall, where a young fellow named Jim Kozak reigns over a 3/17 Wurlitzer. Dick and I got Jim to play for almost 45 minutes non-stop while I taped. Then

Don Plenkens at the 3/17 Wicks, Aladdin Theatre, Denver.





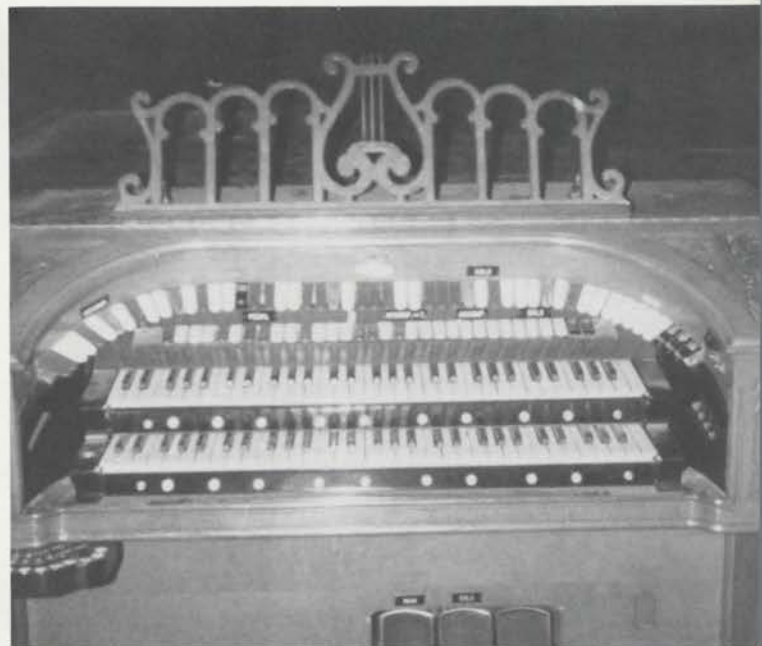
Everett Basset at his 2/4 Morton.



Roy Hanson at the Organ Grinder, Denver.

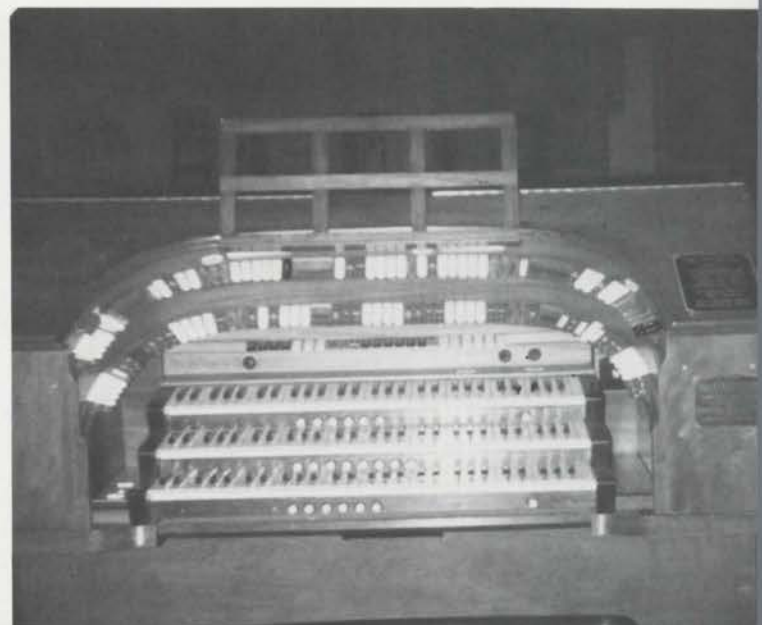


Steve Schlesing, Scooby's Fun Factory, Houston.



2/10 Page, Hedback Theatre, Indianapolis.

Jim Kozak at Pipes and Pizza, Memorial Mall, Houston.



3/16 Louisville Uniphone at Manual High School, Indianapolis.

he gave me a shot at the controls. When I was through, a group at one of the tables complimented me for playing the older kind of music that they like to hear. Jim plays oldies too, but during the noon hour he has to play for his audience, which includes a lot of kids who like to hear newer music. Jim is a fine organist who seems to have an easy rapport with the kids. He's extremely personable and a delight in conversation.

The next day it was off to the Pizza and Pipes on the Gulf Freeway, where Ed Van Ornam presides over a 3/19 Wurlitzer which boasts an accordion. Playing this organ was a little scary for me, because my console time was before Ed's scheduled playing time, so I didn't get to hear what it sounded like before playing it. But, as a friend says, "If you can't play good, play good and loud and nobody will be the wiser," so off I went full tilt, and then I started to tame it down. I had 30 minutes at the console, once again with all the noise makers and tuned percussions out in front, then it was Ed's turn. The lunchtime crowd here was mainly business people from the local stores, so the music was more on the mature side and thoroughly enjoyable. Ed's style is reminiscent of the cocktail lounge intimacy where, even though there is plenty of power in the instrument, the volume level is such that you don't have to yell to carry on a conversation. In Ed's favor, there was little conversation going on — everyone was listening.

Time ran out in Houston, and I traveled on to Denver where I was met by a friend, Jim Brehm. Jim and I were to find out, to our surprise, how much good organ music is available in Denver. The first evening we headed to the Organ Grinder and made on-the-spot arrangements with the management and Roy Hanson, one of the house organists, to tape some of the music. The Organ Grinder houses an absolutely magnificent 4/36 Wurlitzer, complete with 32' Diaphone and a stop list to make anyone drool! The console is a work of art. All the partitions and railings are outlined with Tivoli lights, which can be made to "march" both forward and backward and in combination independent of, or in time with, the rhythm of the music. There are pinwheels with colored lights, strobe lights, flood and spot lights and a mirror ball, all of which are controlled by the organist, who also controls the screen and

projector for silent films. The tonal range of the organ is outstanding; in addition to a great full organ sound, it had sobbing Tibias for torch songs. Just fantastic, and Roy Hanson obligingly demonstrated the tonal capacity of this beauty as we recorded him from the balcony.

The next morning we trekked over to the Aladdin Theatre where Frank Gandy and Charlie Herman lovingly minister to their 3/17 Wicks. Have you ever come across an organ where the Vox Humana is enclosed in its own separate swell chamber *within* the main chamber, and has its own expression pedal? This one does, but the crew has wired the shutters open; control is by the main chamber expression pedal. Heavy drapes muffled the sound quite a bit at the time of my visit, but all of this has since been changed, and the theatre has been almost completely re-done. The whole crew at the Aladdin are really great people, and they're justly proud of what they have been accomplishing.

That evening we visited the Denver Paramount, where Ivan Duff met us. The Pipe Piper in the Jan./Feb. 1982 issue of THEATRE ORGAN erroneously lists the Paramount Theatre 4/20 Wurlitzer as being played "rarely." Not true! It's played quite often, is in excellent condition (even the pizzicato tabs work!), and is kept in tune beautifully. It is also one of the few installations left with a slave console that works. Unfortunately, ownership of the property on which the theatre stands is in litigation; any and all support to help the chapter keep this palace as a landmark will be greatly appreciated.

The organ includes a beautiful-sounding Piano and a Kinura that sounds good even in the lower octaves. I was delighted to play an organ of this size and tonal capacity where everything worked. I went through one and a half cassettes before we had to leave. My only regret was that I left fingerprints on the freshly painted console, even after Ivan warned me not to touch "anything white." Sorry.

After this exhilarating experience we headed back to the Organ Grinder to catch Ed Benoit at the console. This time we set up my recording equipment on the main floor. Ed did a beautiful job accompanying the silent movie *Weekend Driver*. Sigfried Benson, who had been with us at the Paramount, dropped in, and when

Ed took his break, Sigfried introduced us. I asked Ed if it would be possible for me to play, but he told me that Dennis Hedberg in Portland controls who plays this gem, and he couldn't be reached that night. I think that if I had been allowed to play I would have been overwhelmed by the organ, so I wasn't too disappointed.

My time had run out in Denver, so it was off to Indianapolis, where I was met by Bob Drake. The next morning Central Indiana Chapter Chairman George A. Wever took me to the Hedback Community Theatre to see its 2/10 Page. After a little confusion finding light switches, we got around to playing and recording this little beauty. A note of commendation is due Mr. and Mrs. Hedback, for their financial assistance made possible the restoration of the theatre and the organ installation. The 2/10 Page has a beautifully-carved console, rides a lift which brings it from the pit up to half-level with the stage, and has a great sound. It is an easy organ for an organist to hear while playing.

Later we went to the Paramount Music Palace where Jonas Nordwall was the featured guest performer for

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the evening. I met some really great chapter members there who had come to hear Jonas, and he did a beautiful job. I also got to chat with staff organist Bill Vlasak. The Music Palace has a strict "no recording" policy, so no cassettes of this evening.

Next afternoon it was off to Manual High School to tape the Louisville Uniphone, which is the dream-come-true of Carl Wright, an instructor at the school. Under his guidance and loving care, the organ, originally from a church, has blossomed into a 3/16 theatre organ, with future growth planned. The new three-manual console, which has been immaculately refinished, came from a theatre in Brooklyn, and wherever possible, Carl has been adding Gottfried pipework. An upright piano rounds out the goodies available at the console, and the voicing has been done in such a way as to provide beautiful solo and ensemble registration.

All too soon it was time to return home. The next morning George took me to the airport for my flight back to

New Jersey. I had planned a side trip to Fort Wayne, Indiana, but had to cancel because of severe flooding in that area. As I waited for my flight, Murphy struck again: snow! The flight was only delayed for about 15 minutes, though, and George and I spent the time listening to tapes on a pocket cassette player with two pairs of phones.

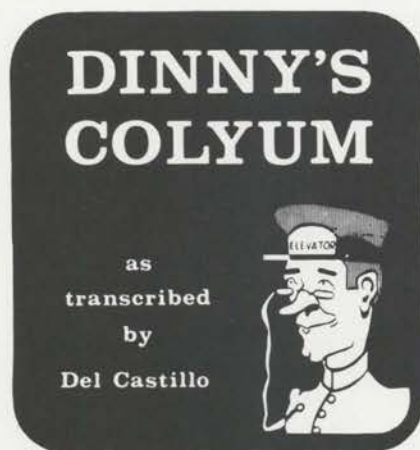
After I got home I surveyed my tapes and found I had 40 hours of recorded organ music! The amazing part was that, of the 14 organs I had recorded, I had played 11. It was certainly a worthwhile trip, not only for all the beautiful organs I heard and recorded, but more importantly, for all the beautiful people I met, many of whom graciously accepted me solely on the basis of my membership in ATOS and Garden State TOS. For each person I've mentioned by name, there is another who deserves to be mentioned. As my friend in Denver, Jim Brehm, said, "You know, organ people are really great." That sums it up. Thank you, all of you. □

learned how to play it. They is one good thing about these little clubs and that is that you are suppose to play something every month so mostly you try to learn a noo peace so you can show off with it. Well most members will do that and they will play not more than two peaces and then quit. It seems like the ones that dont learn there peaces before they come in are the ones who keep on playin more peaces and so the more they play the worser they get. So you have to lissen while they lose there place and have to start over again and when they have to turn the page why they get all mixed up and when they play rong cords why either they dont know it or if they do know it why you have to wait while they try to find the right one. And as for the peddles why it seems like any old note will do just so they can keep that old left foot ahoppin up and down.

Well, so that is two resolutions I am workin on and so far I been keepin them pretty good, so long as I dont mention no names like in what I just been sayin. So my third resolution is that I will learn to play one noo peace and when it comes to my turn I will play jest that one peace and that is it. So I guess you can tell that my fourth resolution has to be that I will try to practiss regular and not jest wait until a couple days before the nex meetin. So far that is the one I aint been keepin so good. I suppose if I had a job playin which isnt very likely then I would have to keep in practiss. But I aint. So if I want to read a book or the papers or go to a movie or get up late and do nothin or go joggin or do some gardenin why before I know it it is time to go to bed and I aint touched the organ. I aint goin to kid myself and make a resolution to practiss one hour every day because I know I aint agoin to do it. So I made myself a list and here it is.

1. Dont criticise the other persons playin.
2. Dont talk when he is playin.
3. Learn a peace before you try to play it for other peepel.
4. Practiss a little every day.
5. Or maybe every other day.
6. Or at leas once a week. □

Del's birthday is April 2. For those who would like to send a card or message, here is his address: Lloyd G. Del Castillo, 2008 Preuss Road, Los Angeles, California 90034.



1982 has came and went and good rubbitch to it. We was suppose to be out of the woods by now and everthing would be peachy instead of we got something they call Reganomicks that I dont understand any more than I ever knew what they meant by Duble Didgit inflation. All I know is for the last two years my bills keep agoin up and my savins keep agoin down. They aint no call for elyvater men any more. All them new fangle ottomatic elyvaters has took care of that. And as for organ jobs if it wasnt for the pizza parlors all the organ players they would be on releaf. I spose that is maybe why all the organ players in all the organ clubs cant get along together

any more. When they is less money comin in to the members why then they is less money comin in to the clubs and when they go broke why then they start accusin each other.

Like always when the Noo Year come around I started makin Noo Year resolutions that I knew I wasnt goin to keep on acct. I never kep any of the ones I made in all the other years. One of the noo ones I made was not to criticise any other organ players playin, espeshally since I dont play so good myself so if I aint perfeck why should I expeck any body else to be perfeck. And another one is to shut up when anybody is playin. I go to these little organ clubs I belong to and somebody will sit down at the organ and start to play and the person next to me will start yappin and if they aint agoin to lissen to the organ what did they come for? Of course in our clubs they is some of the members who get up to play and they hope nobody is agoin to lissen so they wont hear the mistakes. Well I suppose that is OK but I like to lissen so as I can find out what to do better or if the playin aint so good I can find out what not to do.

I guess one of the things what not to do is to bring in some music that they aint hardly ever seen before and inflick that on peepel when they aint