

More About Don Baker

*A Commentary by
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After reading the review of the Detroit Convention by Geoffrey Paterson, I am convinced that this type of reporting is a credit to THEATRE ORGAN. Mr. Paterson's effort is of a quality comparable to that of Jack Kroll, movie and drama critic of *Newsweek* magazine. After reading Kroll's reviews, I feel as though I had seen the movie or attended the play. Likewise, even though the only convention event which I attended was the Pre-glow Don Baker concert, I now feel as though I had stayed for the entire convention. However, for the benefit of the new members, as well as some of the long-time members, Mr. Paterson's critique of the Pre-glow concert needs some elaboration.

Along with describing the Senate Theatre and the DTOC Wurlitzer beautifully, Mr. Paterson wrote of Don Baker "He plays the same — and the same things. He uses the line 'I keep playing the same things because I keep getting asked to' . . . He plays by rote." This he does, and you'd better believe it, because when Don was in New York, he probably helped increase the popularity of the mighty Wurlitzer for more consecutive years than any other theatre organist. People would return to the Times Square Paramount again and again, not so much for the movie as just to hear Don Baker at the console. Plays by rote? You bet, because one movie patron's favorite tune at the matinee might be 300 New Yorker's favorite at the evening performances.

In these multi-level, many-splendored, cavernous movie palaces, with their organ consoles situated out of view below overture level, the organist would wait. Grandiose prosceniums bathed in blushing hues would

fade away to a spotlight into which those magnificent ivory and gold consoles rose into full view. In New York, Don Baker would play everything from "Fascinating Rhythm" to "Dancing in the Dark," and other favorites which probably he had already played several times that same day. Call it what you will — That's Theatre Organ.

Further on, Mr. Paterson reported that what he heard seemed to be ". . . chorus after chorus, getting louder and louder, all in andante or vivace duple meter, noodling away, playing lots of notes with no imagination or feeling whatsoever." However, even further on Mr. Paterson makes a statement which disputes this description. He writes "For over an hour, golden oldie followed golden oldie, all faded facsimiles of the Baker originals . . ." It has been said that perhaps it is we who have faded since first hearing those golden oldies. Whatever — Geoffrey was right, there were many Baker originals and

his "Dancing in the Dark," "Dancing Tambourine," "The Carioca" and "The Continental," just to name a few, have yet to be equaled. Every member should own one or more of these recordings, because — That's Theatre Organ.

These theatre organists discovered years ago what today's organists are just now discovering and the late Ben Hall ("The Best Remaining Seats") described when he wrote, "Part one-man band, part symphony orchestra and part sound effects department, the Wurlitzer — one of the most versatile instruments ever devised by man." It can play straight for the classics, but these were seldom played in the sumptuous movie palaces where the organists dazzled thousands with incomparable syncopations of popular tunes of the day.

However, as wonderful as these theatres were, it was organists like Don Baker, Jesse Crawford and George Wright who played their Mighty Wurlitzers in presentations of such proportions that for many years they had prime billing along with current attractions on the beautiful marquees. Today, the public taste for entertainment has changed, and it isn't necessary for the movie companies to gather thousands in one place just to see a movie and the huge, ornate auditoriums no longer have a *raison d'être*. There are few in-theatre installations remaining, and if these theatre pipe organs are being presented by organists like Don Baker, the concerts should not be missed by any member, because here you will enjoy theatre organ the way it was, still is and always will be. □

