

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF DON THOMPSON

Transcribed and edited by
Lloyd E. Klos

Most of the writer's biographies have been about those whose careers graced the first big era of the theatre organ — the exciting teens and twenties. We now bring you, largely in his own words, the story of Don Thompson, a man whose pipe organ activities date from the forties to the present. This does not mean that his life has been less colorful than the others. Far from it! He has been a friend of many theatre organists who were established stars when Don met them.

"I was born in Kendal in northern England in 1934. There were no musicians in the family; no musical background at all. At the age of four, my parents took me to the seaside resort of Blackpool, which became a family tradition for 18 years.

"On my first trip I was taken to the Tower Ballroom to see the children's ballet, accompanied by the Tower Band and the organ. After the performance, we stayed while Reginald Dixon played the 3/13 Wurlitzer for dancing. I was enthralled, my parents told me, and I declared that I wanted to do this when I grew up. No one thought any more of it, considering it a childish whim. However, on subsequent visits, my sole desire was not to ride the attractions on the fairground with the others but to hear Reginald Dixon play the organ. It cost sixpence in those days.

"I also discovered the Empress Ballroom, situated a few hundred yards away. Admittance was also sixpence, which enabled me to spend the

whole evening listening to Horace Finch on that 3/13 Wurlitzer, Ted Heath and his great band, plus singers and other acts.

"I became utterly fascinated with Dixon's playing and discovered one of his records at home: 'Blackpool Song Mixture 2.' This record was played a great deal and among the numbers was 'Shuffle Off to Buffalo' with train effect, which I used at Toronto's Organ Grinder quite often.

"At the age of seven I decided to learn to play. Pipe organs were not available, and home organs were out of range for our modest working-class family. Therefore, I bought a piano which cost 45 pounds with money I'd saved from christening, gifts and so on. My first teacher, a Miss James, 80 years of age, gave a lesson a week for half a crown. I took for two years, but didn't get very far as she was rather decrepit. I was also a boy soprano with the school choir and gave my first broadcast at the age of nine, singing 'Jerusalem.'

"The same year, I engaged another teacher, Margaret Hine, who was more experienced and well known in town. However, she didn't have much interest in me because I didn't care to take examinations and get my name in the papers as a student of hers. I wanted to learn, not have to prove it! So, at ten, I terminated lessons and studied on my own. At 12 I made my first recording, a private release on 78 rpm playing 'Meditation' from *Thaïs* and the first movement of Rubinstein's concerto on piano.

"At 16, I asked the vicar of a little church near home if I could practice on its pipe organ. He gave me permission and I'd go in during the after-

The earliest photo of Don Thompson in existence shows him in 1935 attacking a piano. (Thompson collection)





Kentmere Church in the English Lake District, where Don Thompson had his first job as organist in 1950.
(Thompson collection)

noons, lock the door and play such things as 'The Desert Song,' which is very unliturgical. Little did I know that the church janitor often sneaked in to listen with her friends. She told me this 25 years later!

"My family and I used to visit friends in a farm house in one of the remote lakeland villages. They knew of my organ practicing and, as their church organist was in need of a vacation, it was suggested that I might substitute. I played a service in her presence, followed by a month while she was away. This was my first job.

"Shortly after, the organist at Stricklandgate Methodist Church in

Kendal became pregnant and I was recommended to the choir director by a friend. The organ was a three-manual Blakett & Howden, as I recall, and had stop tabs instead of drawknobs. I played such numbers as 'Ave Maria' with all the tremos on, which is not in keeping with the Methodist Church, but the congregation seemed to like it.

"In 1952 I went on vacation to Germany with a church youth group and had opportunity to play some rare organs in churches and cathedrals. In Bad-Kreuznach was a U.S. Army base with a large chapel and theatre combined, in which was a Hammond

organ, the first one I'd seen. I was asked to do a concert, and I played classical numbers exclusively, using the left hand for the difficult pedal passages. This was my first solo concert.

"I tried for Oxford and Cambridge and much to the surprise of everyone was admitted to the latter, no one from my school having been accepted for generations. Within a few days of my arrival in Cambridge in October, 1953, I discovered an eight-rank Christie in the Victoria Cinema in Market Square, the first theatre-type instrument I'd seen other than those in Blackpool. Gilbert Handy was the organist, and I was disappointed in him as he didn't get good results. He was a touring organist and on in years. However, the following week I heard Reginald New there, one of the great names on the British theatre organ scene, and I was absolutely dazzled by his performance! I got to know this kind, simple man with a strong cockney accent. He let me have a go at the Christie and was most helpful.

"I mentioned to the organist of the college chapel that I played, and he was grateful to have me subbing for him every six weeks at services.

"I listened to radio broadcasts of organ music a lot, basically Dixon who was on three or four times a week. Another whom I thoroughly enjoyed was Stanley Tudor, playing in the Gaumont, Manchester. He had a lively style like Dixon, and I loved the sound of that Wurlitzer. Most of the other broadcasts were done on the BBC Möller and I found the sound of the organ as well as most of the playing very boring. A lot of British organists played delicate novelty pieces and tried to educate their audiences. But Dixon and Tudor played lively, danceable music. That is what I liked.

"Shortly after my appearance at the Victoria, I discovered the Cinema Organ Society, a very small group in Cambridge which came to hear Reg New. Upon meeting them, I became a member of this good-hearted bunch. From then on, I attended many meetings of the COS and the Theatre Organ Club. The procedure was to feature several organists at a concert, then afterwards have open console for the noodlers. By 1957, I had worked up to feature artist. At these programs I was privileged to play all the great cinema organs in the Lon-



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The Cinema Organ Society at the Trocadero Elephant and Castle in 1953. A. General Secretary Tony Moss; B. Chairman Douglas Badham. Organists 1. Nelson Elms, 2. John Howlett, 3. Bryan Rodwell, 4. Jack Banbury, 5. Eric Spruce, 6. Reginald New, 7. Robin Richmond, 8. Don Thompson. (Thompson collection)

don area. It was an education to hear the great artists and to pick up some of the things they did.

"I practiced a technique of Dixon's where he played the melody with his left hand while his right hand improvised. I found this difficult to do, and when I mentioned to him how easily he did it he replied, 'Yes, but I'm left-handed!'

"About 1954 I had been appointed

senior college organist. Without a degree or formal training, I got away with it — except the time the chorus and I did different pieces of music at the same time! The college head was upset over this, and in the future I made sure of every selection to be used.

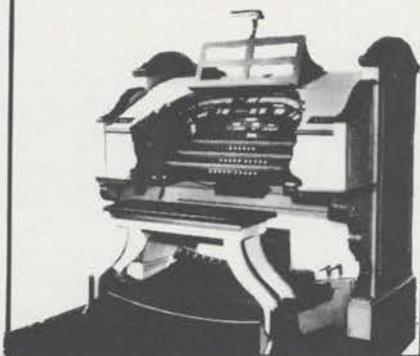
"It was encouraging to see how many of the big names went out of their way to be kind and encouraging to me. Reg New, of course, was good fun, considerate and helpful. Another good friend was Clifford Birchall who worked the ABC circuit, a highly literate and witty man. A master of puns, he still writes me funny letters 25 years later. After his stint at the New Cinema, Fred Emney with co-star Robin Richmond came in. Robin and I made the rounds, playing the college instruments about the city. When he played a night club, he always saw that I got a good seat to hear him.

"I had purchased a goodly number of records by this time: everything Dixon ever did, some Torch, Stanley Tudor, Bryan Rodwell and Robin Richmond. Listening to these was beneficial, as I could pick up many of their nuances.

"In 1956 I got my degree in literature specializing in Shakespeare, and went to Oxford to get a degree in educational psychology. During summer vacation, I took a job at Morecambe, a seaside resort only 20 miles from my home in Kendal. It was a six-night-a-week job, with some matinees, for dancing in the ballroom, and it lasted five months. I played a B-2 Hammond for weekly talent shows. Trans-

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posing in many keys for the vocalists gave me invaluable experience.

"In the fall I returned to college. If you've a degree from Cambridge and go to Oxford, doing a prescribed course in residence, you automatically get your degree. That's the arrogance of the English! Being there is sufficient education!

"I was itching to get back into show business so I quit school and got a job at the Trocadero Ballroom in Derby, a large building with a Compton Melotone and illuminated console. Derby was an industrial town, I knew no one, and the ten pounds weekly wasn't sufficient to keep me there after three weeks. I heard of a Compton in the Regal and one in the Gaumont. I tried each and I opened the Christmas show each night for two weeks, my first job as a resident cinema organist. I believe this was at the Regal.

"After Derby I went to London to be a professional organist and practically starved there! I lived for a while by stealing bottles of milk from doorsteps, the only dishonest thing I ever did. Finally, I landed a pub job in the east end as a pianist, collecting my wages by shaking a box under the noses of the patrons.

"In the fifties, 'Minors Matinées' (Saturday morning kids' shows) were the only things the theatre organs were used for in Britain. In early 1957 I applied for and got a job for two weeks playing an MM at the Odeon Astoria, Brixton. The organ was a three-manual Compton with two consoles; one on stage, the other in the pit. After the show one day Ray Baines, who was at the Granada Edmonton, Cyril Elliott, who played at the King's Cross Gaumont, and I

Don Thompson's first London appearance, on the 3/8 Christie in the Elephant & Castle cinema, 1953.
(Thompson collection)



were having coffee. I mentioned that while I was playing someone hit me on the head with an apple. Cyril said, 'That's nothing. William Tell had one shot off his head!' Ray said, 'Yes, that WAS an overture, wasn't it?'

"I had resumed playing for COS meetings and at the Gaumont Chelsea. Gerald Shaw, whom I had long admired, was the star. I at last had the chance to meet him.

"An organist was needed at the Granada Kennington. This had a Hammond surrounded with superstructure and on a lift. I was there for the better part of a year. During the winter, I got a daytime job and moved my residence to Cumberland Place, next door to the Odeon Marble Arch. This had the largest theatre organ in Europe, the famous Christie. Though I could not hear the music, I could feel the vibration of the pedal notes in my flat. Gerald Shaw was in residence and when he started his program I'd dash down the fire escape, cross the courtyard, enter a little doorway, run through a maze of passages and wind up in the pit to catch most of Gerald's performance. He and I became close friends and it offered me a rare opportunity to hear a true master at work.

"In May 1957 I returned to Morecambe for the water shows, serving as music director for the city. I also did shows and other functions on the Compton Melotone on a revolving stage at the Floral Hall Ballroom, and played in Kendal where a friend had a group, utilizing a Jennings electric organ.

"Back in London in the fall, I managed a restaurant for a while and then went to an east-end pub playing an Everett Orgatron, a weird instrument which included a grand piano having a bar beneath for controlling an organ sound.

"I spotted an ad in *Melody Maker* for an organist to appear in Belgium for the International Exhibition in 1958. I got the job and played with two other musicians at a fashionable nightspot called 'The Penguin' on a Hammond C-3 with percussion and vibrato, the only one in Europe. We did broadcasts, some records and guest spots at the exhibition. The group broke up when an unemployed Belgian organist protested my employment.

"Returning to England, I had two weeks of free time during which I saw

Judy Garland perform at the Dominion Theatre. I was spellbound, of course, and that evening shortly after going to bed I got a call from a friend at the theatre inviting me to the on-stage party. The phone was grabbed out of his hand and Judy called, 'I don't know who you are, but if you're a friend of Jaffney you're a friend of mine. Come on over, but be careful when you open the door because I have my crystal earrings on tonight!' I went down and was pushed into playing the piano, accompanying Judy Garland in 'Over the Rainbow.'

"After this two weeks in London, I went back to Morecambe for another summer season, this time at the Ice-Drome. The two-month show was extremely demanding as the musical director in Blackpool picked all classical music. It was good training in sight-reading and changes in tempos however, as well as playing for the absolutely strict tempos the skaters demanded."

Don's next job was with a brewery playing Hammond for dancing and vaudeville in a chain of Yorkshire pubs. In 1959 he returned to the Swimming Stadium in Morecambe for the summer and then moved to Newcastle for a season at the Majestic Ballroom. The next year he was back at the Stadium during the day and played the show *Let's Go* at the Alhambra in the evenings. That fall he opened the Newton Heath Sporting Club in Manchester, playing a Riegg organ for dancing and the variety show. More club dates followed that winter and it was back to another season at the water show in 1961, two shows a day, with two shows each night at Blackpool's South Pier, an hour away. He had by this time bought his own instrument, a Price Silvertone, and was constantly in demand for concerts throughout Britain.

At the end of the 1961 summer season he moved to the Continental Theatre in Middlesbrough. "After three months, the owner sold the property and I became resident organist at a large club. Using my degree, I taught grammar school during the day. Did my first solo broadcast at Middlesbrough's Empire Theatre for the BBC show *Northeast Roundabout*. I bought a house on the seacoast and settled down. At this time (1962) I made my first LP, on an electric organ. It was called *Rhythm Classics*.

“Getting the wanderlust after five years, I took off on a Mediterranean cruise and upon reaching Beirut decided it would be a lovely place in which to live the year ’round. Taxes were low and the climate excellent. After inquiries, I gave up everything in England in 1967 — house, teaching, engagements, TV and clubs, and settled in Beirut.

“The only theatre in the Middle East was the Byblos, a Cinerama house which showed first-run movies. I played five minutes a day there on a Hammond which came out on rails from the side to a center position, sometimes with sparks flying! The Western music I played for two weeks didn’t go over, so I bought some records and learned Arab music. When I presented this, the audience went absolutely wild! I did this for a year, and also taught Shakespeare (in French) in a college there until the strain caused me to quit. English is spoken very little in this college. So I just played at the Byblos and lounged on the beach during the day. I had supper at the same restaurant every night with ambassadors, foreign ministers and other officials. They suggested an organ be purchased, and after it was I played nightly at the ‘Rhenania.’ Had the time of my life!

“About this time I met Jack Languth, the *New York Times* bureau chief in Saigon, who was passing through the area to check on the Middle East situation. He reasoned that although I had the best job in the country, there were no more heights

to climb, no more money, plus the threat of trouble in the area. ‘The only place to go is the States,’ he concluded. He convinced me to apply for a teacher’s job as the American musicians union would not permit me to work as an alien, and gave me the name of the headmaster of the Harvard School in Hollywood whom I wrote and got an immediate acceptance. I applied for my visa and got it at the American Embassy.

“However, I made the mistake of going to England first to visit my father and to my horror learned that I couldn’t take more than 25 pounds out of the country! I arrived in New York City on September 8, 1968, and was short two dollars for my air ticket to California. The clerk said, ‘We’ll fiddle it somehow,’ and I arrived in Los Angeles with but a dime in my pocket. It was used to phone the school, they picked me up, and with an advance on my first week’s salary I began a two-year tenure.

“Of course, I was unable to play the organ professionally for some time until I could join the union, but after visiting the Organ Center on Hollywood Boulevard one day and trying out a Gulbrandsen, they asked me to give a concert there. I made some friends as a result, my popularity began to rise and offers for me to play came from several area clubs. I joined the union, and discovered the ATOS at the Wiltern Theatre.

“My first pipe organ appearance in the States was at the Elks’ Club Robert-Morton. I made over 40 appear-



Don Thompson (in University garb) with BBC’s Robin Richmond in Cambridge, 1964. They had been trying various college organs. (Thompson collection)

ances the first year in the States, and by the second year I was doing about 20 electronic organ concerts a month. Pipe organ concerts were not easy to come by. My first formal concert on pipes came at the Avenue Theatre in San Francisco in August 1969, thanks to Ralph Ehat. Several concerts followed.

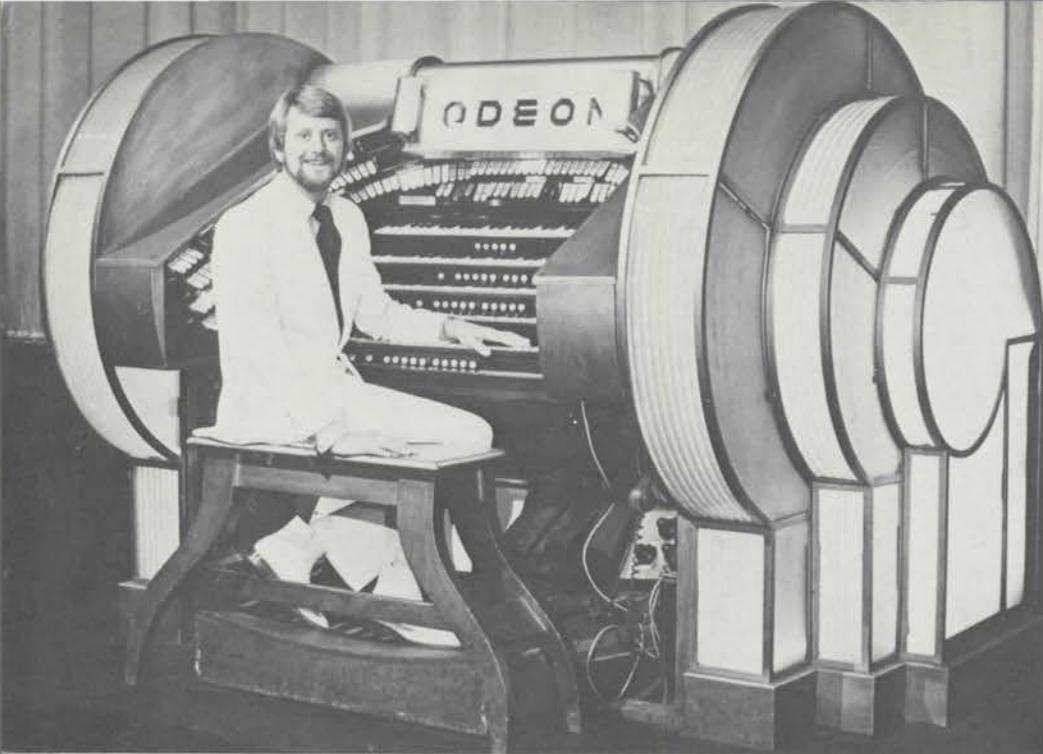
“About this time at one of the Los Angeles Organists Breakfast Club meetings, I was introduced to Bill Johnson, president of Concert Recording. He liked my rhythmic style and suggested an LP record of music of the twenties. We recorded this disc in October 1969 in three hours. It was entitled *The Roaring Twenties* and was a success.

“Still, I wasn’t a performer on the ‘circuit.’ I’ve found that chapter chairmen and secretaries are, on the whole, very lax in replying to inquiries. The bulk of my concerts on the road have been before non-ATOS clubs — Rochester, Toronto, Syracuse, Binghamton, Detroit, etc., and private theatres such as Old Town Music Hall in El Segundo, California, where I played 15 concerts.

“Before leaving Beirut, a friend gave me the name of organist Bob Mitchell in Hollywood, director of the Mitchell Boys Choir, and he secured some church engagements for me. An opening for an organist at the First Church of Religious Science in Glendale beckoned and I was there

After playing background music for the Miss Great Britain contest for five years, Don was chairman of the judging panel in 1962. The winner (girl in center) was the daughter of organist Horace Finch. Don says that this had nothing to do with the decision! (Thompson collection)





Don at the Odeon, Leicester Square Compton. This is a superb example of the illuminated surround, hallmark of many English theatre organ consoles. Lights in the surround change color. (Thompson collection)

three years.”

Don’s engagements came thick and fast, and to list them all would require pages of copy. Suffice to say, he was acquiring a big following and his popularity increased manyfold. Stu Green gave initial recognition in his “Vox Pops” column in THEATRE ORGAN.

“I did a concert at the San Diego Fox which was a horrible experience, as the chambers are behind the organist and the sound comes back in delayed fashion. I couldn’t hear a thing I was doing and had to use couplers like crazy. The reviews were great, but I disagreed!

“Between concert engagements I

appeared at the Louisiana State Fair at Baton Rouge, playing a Hammond. I recorded *A Date With Don* on Joe Koons’ 3/22 Wurlitzer, and then went on my first American tour. My first Wiltern Theatre appearance followed. Since I was doing so well with concerts, I quit teaching and took a job for a time at Bradley’s Restaurant in Huntington Park, California, on a Hammond X-77. This allowed me to concertize frequently. After several guest appearances at Bill Breuer’s pizza parlors in Redwood City and Santa Clara, I was offered a position at Redwood City which I readily accepted. Jack Gustafson and Tom Hazleton were my colleagues.

“In 1972 I was asked to play the Virginia Theatre in Alexandria for the ATOS Convention. It turned out to be a most miserable experience. The hot, muggy weather caused the pipes to go out of tune in unison and the tremulants started to sound like a nanny goat. The experience set my career back ten years because a lot of chapter representatives assumed that the disaster was caused by my playing, rather than by the organ’s shortcomings.”

Early in 1973, after “playing the pizza” for two years, Don was approached with a generous offer by some Boston people who had ambitions to open the first organ-equipped pizza parlor on the East Coast. He quit his California job, loaded his belonging into a truck and drove east.

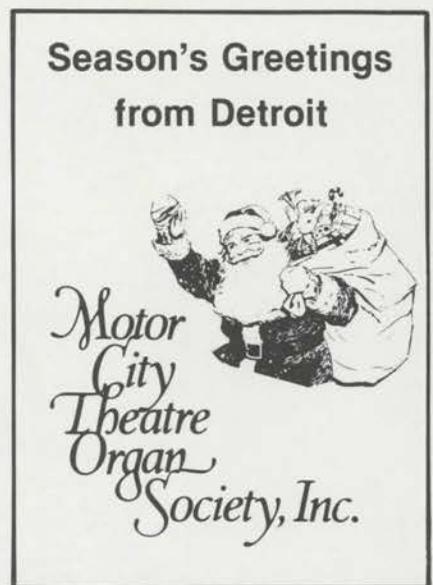
The deal fell through after three months and, having lost a lot of money in the process, Don was very low in funds. Hearing of another pizza parlor to open in the Los Angeles area, Don contacted the owner and was offered the job. Once more he loaded everything into a truck and headed west.

“I stayed in the place three days! The organ was dreadful and the location was adjacent to a low-class housing project. As a result the patrons were rough, made a lot of noise and couldn’t have cared less about the organ.

“Previously I had been in contact with Sandy Fleet about a job in his San Diego pizza parlor organization. He was amenable to my joining the outfit, and I did so as vice president and music director. However, a mistake had been made in the choice of building, which was lost to them. So, I practiced and lay on the beach for a year while on salary, until a building was secured. I enjoyed that year!

“For the first time in my career I took organ lessons, in Bach interpretation. My teacher was John Kuzma of St. Paul’s Church in San Diego. Then I took a tour in the fall of 1974 followed by a trip to England, my first time back there since 1968. The climax of the tour was a concert at the Odeon Leicester Square, where I had sat in the pit enthralled all those years earlier. I felt very satisfied to be on the bench, playing at last in England’s top theatre.

“Returning to the States, I opened on Halloween at the Organ Power Pizza in San Diego (with the *Phantom*





Don Thompson at the Organ Grinder in Toronto.

of the Opera), playing the 3/11 Wurlitzer for a six-month engagement. A disagreement with an official — on my interpretation of a Bach Toccata and Fugue, of all things! — resulted in my quitting. Immediately after, I became organist at Ken's Melody Inn in Los Altos, where I opened in June, 1975. However, I wasn't overly enthused at my situation and upon hearing that the new Organ Grinder Restaurant in Toronto was looking for an organist, I made it known via the grapevine that I was available. They waved a most lucrative contract under my nose which I signed. Once more, my possessions were loaded into a truck and in November, 1975, I arrived in the Queen City."

Don played in Toronto until this past spring (1983), developing over

the years a devoted following of Organ Grinder "regulars." During this time he studied Bach again, with John Tuttle of St. Paul's Church, made several trips to England playing concerts and broadcasts and worked on his degree at the Royal Conservatory of Music in any spare time that was left. At the time he said, "I would imagine that sooner or later I'll retire to a nice, quiet church and play Bach for the rest of my life!"

When he left the Organ Grinder, Don had originally intended to give up regular playing in order to concentrate on a concert career, but he soon decided that this was out of the question. When asked to elaborate, he put it this way: "It is a problem that others before me have stumbled over, and has to do with the interpretation of theatre organ playing. Many fans, mostly general public, think of theatre organ as entertainment and want their favorite organists to entertain them. Other fans, most of whom are ATOS members, think of theatre organ playing as an art form and require their organists to recreate as closely as possible the best of the bygone days. The former, as it happens, are generally the people who attend theatre organ concerts. The latter tend often to be those who organize and present theatre organ concerts, devotees who like to gather round the console in the dim light of a work light, listening to recreations of Jesse Crawford arrangements.

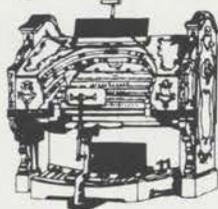
"Herein lies the problem. If an organist plays to *entertain*, he is likely to fill the house and receive standing

ovations and sell hundreds of recordings. However, what he does won't please the 'work lamp brigade' and so he probably won't be invited back. If he slants his program to appeal to *them*, he will certainly be invited back again and again, but will play to rapidly diminishing audiences and will sell no records.

"Since the vast majority of concert locations in the U.S. are associated with one chapter or another, making a career out of concertizing is out of the question. I return again and again to entertainment-oriented venues, private organ groups generally, but they are few in number. I have discovered over the years that it is a complete waste of time even attempting to organize a concert tour of chapters."

The pizza parlor provides the perfect outlet for an exuberant entertainer such as Don who needs an enthusiastic audience, so his future for now is "more of the same." He is now resident at Ye Olde Pizza Joynt in Hayward, California, and intends to stay there for the foreseeable future, until the day he throws in the towel and retires to his nice, quiet church to play Bach. □

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