

PROFILE NO. 3

HERBIE KOCH

... M. H. Doner

Another in the series directing the spotlight onto the life and activities of the "greats" at the console. Mr. Koch's wide experience ranges from his first appearance at the age of 15 until his retirement (probably temporary) from radio and TV after 37 years of continuous appearances.

TWENTY-TWO YEARS of radio broadcasting from the Organ Studio of WHAS, Louisville, Kentucky, attests the popularity of Herbert Lee Koch, native son of this great metropolis which boasts a population of 500,000 people. Two years ago, in a TV popularity contest, conducted by Louisville's *TV Press* magazine and in which more than 3300 votes were cast, Mr. Koch walked off with top honors as the most popular male personality on TV in the area!

Last June, Herbie, father of two married daughters and grandfather of four ("more to come, I understand"), a Scottish Rite Mason (32nd degree), a Shriner, and a Kentucky Colonel, retired from radio and TV work. "I wanted," said Herbie, "to get out before the public tires of me. I'd like to be home once in a while, and my wife thinks I'll live longer if I don't carry such a heavy schedule." An admirable reason to be sure, but we would have to inquire of Mrs. Koch whether her talented husband has achieved his goal. For we note that Herbie is now a teacher with the Baldwin Piano Company, demonstrates Baldwin organs, composes music (he's one of Kentucky's leading composers), plays the 4m/36r Austin at First Church of Christ Scientist, is Associate Organist of the Scottish Rite Temple, is Organist and Choir Director at the B'rith Sholom Temple, and concertizes in the Louisville area. It sounds like a full program, Herbie!

Maestro Koch, to quote from *TV Press*, "has a history of performance which is unmatched in the south." His programs, which begin with the signature tune of "Deep

Purple" include church music, concert numbers and popular melodies, embellished with outstanding local artists, pianists, folk singers, violinists, operatic singers, and vocalists for variety. Such is the music Herbie has delivered to his vast radio audience for so many years and why a WHAS-TV producer jokingly cited organist Koch as "Guardian of the Balance."

Born in Louisville in 1904, he was but 15 years old when he made his first public appearance. It came about like this: it became necessary to hurriedly find a substitute organist to preside at the organ in Louisville's Rialto Theatre. They found young Herbie on the tennis court in his tennis clothes—and this is what he wore at the console. The lad took over, got the job. Since formal dress was required at the Rialto and Herbie could find no tuxedo trousers to fit him, he settled for knee-length trousers. The Management simply placed a screen around the console to hide his legs from the audience. The organ was a three manual Pileher, one of the first provided with a mechanism for elevating the console from the pit.

This was about the time young Koch started studying music seriously. By 16 he conducted the Louisville Conservatory of Music orchestra. Later he studied at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music and during his sojourn in France some years later studied under the great master Marcel Dupre.

At the Top in the 20's

Mr. Koch's first organ work was accompanying the silent movies and he recalls one of the early films "The Birth of a Nation" which would certainly tax the musical prowess of any organist. When sound movies made their appearance, Koch was featured as solo organist and in such capacity joined the Paramount Publix circuit and toured the United States. His appearances included the Paramount (formerly Riviera) Theatre in Omaha, Nebraska; the Palace in Dallas, Texas; the Paramount in Des Moines, Iowa; the Majestic in San Antonio, Texas; the Circle in Indianapolis, Indiana; the Denver Theatre in Denver, Colorado; Shea's Theatre in Buffalo, New York where he succeeded Henry Murtaugh; the El Granado in Havana, Cuba; the Saenger in New Orleans (4 years) where Mr. and Mrs. Koch performed on twin organs—a four manual Marr and Colton.

"Daddy, please!"

It is always interesting to note unusual incidents in the life of a theatre organist and Herbie has had his share. Back in 1926, at the Saenger theatre in New Orleans, Herbie takes over at console as Ted Lewis and Betty Compson leave the stage. The console rises in the purple beam of light and the organist goes all out on "Carolina in the Mornin'."

Herbie at the console of the 4m/18r Kilgen in the studio of WHAS, Louisville, Kentucky, where he played for twenty-two years.



The first "Golden Age of the Wurlitzer" was just drawing to a close when this picture of Herbie Koch was made at the console of the organ in the Paramount Theatre, Des Moines, Iowa.



"China Town" and "Sleepy Time Gal." The audience applauds lustily and at that moment he feels a tug at his trousers—it is his four year old daughter, Mary Lou, and she lets it be known in the glare of the spotlight, that she must answer the call of Nature. The audience, taking it all in, of course, roars with delight. . . . At Dallas, the seat support collapsed and he fell twenty feet to the bottom of the orchestra pit. He averted a panic in Denver when during a fire, he played "Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here."

Looking through our files on Mr. Koch we found this interesting news clipping, dated March 2, 1929 regarding his engagement at the Riviera in Omaha: "Herbie Koch was the feature this week when he brought to a dénouement his mystery organ playing by parading up and down the aisles playing the mighty theatre organ on a tiny keyboard strapped in front of him. A trailing cable of wires served as a connection to the big console."

During those golden years in the 20's, Herbie toured the country with Norma Talmadge, Ben Bernie, the Ritz Brothers, Ben Turpin, Monte Blue, George Jessel, the Mills Brothers, Dorothy Mackaill, Ken Murray, Joe Penner, Harry Richman, Ginger Rogers, and Eleanor Powell.

His tour of the theatres carried him to London, England where he broadcast nightly programs over the British Broadcasting System from the Dominion Theatre from its 3m/12r Compton, an organ familiar to those possessing the recordings of Frederick Bayco and Allan Brown. This theatre was totally destroyed in World War II by enemy action. Four recitals by Mr. Koch were broadcast from the B.B.C. Theatre Organ. Theatre engagements brought him to Havana and Paris.

Upon his return to the United States in 1933, Mr. Koch accepted his first radio job at WHAS and except for a brief interlude as a producer in Chicago and as musical director for WHO, Des Moines, Iowa, has remained with the station until his recent retirement.

Designs Largest Radio Studio Organ

Mr. Koch designed a special Kilgen organ for WHAS and initiated a coast-to-coast network (C.B.S.) program called "Keyboard and Console"—a half hour program on Saturday afternoons. The organ, initially a 3m/12r job, was rebuilt in 1937 and enlarged to 4m/18r in 1949, bringing the total cost of the organ to \$75,000 and claimed by Koch to be the largest radio studio organ in the country, was designed to handle secular music, concert numbers and the "zip and zing" of jazz.

The console is ebony trimmed in silver. The organ has 320 tablets, 10 combination pistons on each manual plus 10 general pistons. Each manual has a release bar over the stops and there one general release tablet, plus a full set of couplers in all directions—16-8-4. The stop list is as follows:

Open Diapason	16-8-4	Xylophone	8-4
Violin Diapason	16-8-4	Vibraharp (electronic)	8-4
Flute (Concert)	16-8-4-2-2 2/3	Chrysaglott	8-4
	1 3/5	Sleigh bells	
Vox	16-8-4	Tom Tom	
Orch. Oboe	8-4	Glockenspiel	8-4
Tibia	16-8-4-5 2/3-	Chinese Cymbal	
	2-2 2/3	Triangle	
Solo Violin	16-8-4	Cymbal	
Solo Violin Celeste	16-8-4	Snare drum	
Viole de Orch.	16-8-4-15th	Shuffle drum	
Viole Celeste	16-8-4-15th	Bass drum	
French Horn	8-4	Wood block	
Trumpet	16-8-4	Kettle drum	
Tuba	16-8-4	Chimes	
Oboe Horn	8-4	Orch. bells (repeating action)	
Clarinet	16-8-4	Piano (now disconnected)	
Kinura	8-4	Auto horn	
Post Horn	16-8-4	Castanets	
Tremolos—Vox,	16-8-4-2	Tambourine	
Tibia, Solo reeds,		2nd touch on accompaniment and pedal	
strings, accompaniment, plus 1 for Church that affects whole organ (very light).		6 toe pistons	

Two recordings of this organ were made available a few years ago by Mr. Koch via Acme Records: 981 (The Petite Waltz, The Waltzing Cat) and 980 (Valencia, Charmaine). These discs unfortunately are no longer available and we are hopeful that Mr. Koch will soon be given another opportunity to put his fine organ interpretations on disc and tape.

One of his programs, "Dream Serenade," was heard for more than 5000 broadcasts over a period of fifteen years. The program catered to a variety of musical interests and was interspersed with bits of poetry. Police, crossing the city's parks in late evening told Herbie that the air was filled with his music coming from parked ears. Herbie received many complimentary letters from fans in cities far and wide and, during World War II from the South Pacific. Since his retirement from the air waves congratulatory letters continue to come in from all parts of the country.

Congratulations, Mr. Koch, on a splendid record of achievement during your long career as an organist and for your many years of productive service for WHAS and WHAS-TV. We know that millions of radio and TV fans are missing your delightful organ music. Your successor, Johnny Shrader will, we trust, keep your great Kilgen alive and we wish him every success.