



Al Melgard at the Chicago Stadium Barton console.

Al Melgard and the Biggest Barton

by Dan Barton, Organbuilder

The Chicago Stadium was opened on March 30, 1929, billed as the "World's Greatest Indoor Arena," occupying an entire city block at 1800 West Madison Street. The seating capacity is 25,000, with 18,000 permanent seats in three balconies and 7000 main floor seats which are removable when the entire floor is used for circuses, ice hockey, basketball or other attractions. This huge enterprise originated with Mr. Patrick T. Harmon, who became president and managing director of the Chicago Stadium Corporation.

One of the features was to be a giant pipe organ, to be spectacular in both console appearance and musical sounds, designed to fill this great auditorium when filled with 25,000 people and with instrumentation that could follow all the action of the sports events to be presented. An organ in size and sound the like of which had never before been built.

Many big organ companies were bidding for the installation, organ companies famous for great church and cathedral organs, others for concert organs and for organs in super

deluxe motion picture theatres. The contract was awarded to the Barton Organ Company. Factors in this decision were the specially designed Barton organs in two of Mr. Harmon's Chicago ballrooms, installations made six years before the stadium was built. Both solved music problems for Mr. Harmon.

At the Dreamland, on Chicago's west side, the elevated tracks ran right across the top of the building and every time a train went past the noise drowned out the orchestra. We installed a two-manual organ on 25-inch wind pressure, two sets of Diapasons, Tuba, Posthorn, a large-scale Bourdon and Tibia, a big String and a big Flute. The organ was used with the orchestra only when the trains went over. At the high point the music was more organ than orchestra, but no one stopped dancing.

At the Arcadia, on the north side, the dance floor was so large and the acoustics so bad that when the crowd was large they crowded around the orchestra in the center with no dancers at either end. Twin organs installed at each end of the building and

played with the orchestra solved this problem. The Dreamland and Arcadia installations made money for Paddy Harmon, and the Barton Organ Company gained a good friend.

A few short years after the stadium opened Mr. Harmon died as a result of an automobile accident. The Chicago Stadium Corporation has since been operated by its two owners, James D. Norris, chairman, and Arthur Wirtz, president.

The Chicago Stadium organ is the largest unit organ in the United States, and, so far as I know, the largest in the world. The console has six manuals and 883 stop tablets and controls. The organ is installed in five organ lofts, which are hung from the ceiling in the center of the arena. Four lofts contain the chests, pipes, regulators and tremulants. One side of each loft forms the sides of a mixing chamber which is the size of one of the organ lofts. It has a dome ceiling and is open at the bottom. The mixing chamber forces the sound downward into the big arena. Each loft has a set of swell shutters which can be operated from the console, one set at a time or in any combination. The fifth loft contains the relays and blower.

The Spencer Orgoblo Company of Hartford, Connecticut, who made the blower stated at the time of installation that it was the largest organ blower in the United States. The blower is 16 feet long and is operated by a 100-hp motor. The air leaves the blower at four stages, starting at 15" pressure, 22" pressure, 50" pressure and the last stage producing the very high pressure used on the large-scale stops. The console is located on a platform below the lower balcony at one end of the arena and is mounted on a lift with left or right turntable.

Now, about Al Melgard . . .

Early in the history of the Barton organ we discovered that to be a success in the theatre organ business we not only had to build the organ, we also had to furnish the organist; one with the proper talent and ability to successfully play a unit theatre organ. We started a school for organists in connection with our Chicago sales office. All theatre owners who purchased a Barton organ agreed to use organists furnished by our company or, if they preferred to use a local organist, to send the organist to our school for instructions and our OK as

to his ability as a unit theatre organist.

At the time we sold the S.J. Gregory Circuit a three-manual, 17-rank organ for a new theatre they were building in Berwyn, Illinois, Mr. Gregory said he had an organist playing for him in Hammond, Indiana, whom he wanted to play the Berwyn organ. We suggested he send the organist to our Chicago office organ school for instructions, and that is how we met Al Melgard.

"Instructions" did I say? Al could play more organ than the instructor. Melgard had everything — a wizard organist, if ever there was one. After one season on the Berwyn organ we put Melgard into our Chicago office as demonstrator and to handle our organ school.

Melgard is a combination of fine musical education and rare natural talent. At an early age Al was started on the piano. Al says he does not know at what age, but he was a very small kid; he liked music and was one of the few kids who really liked to practice. Al's parents were members of one of Chicago's larger churches. This church had a big choir and a very

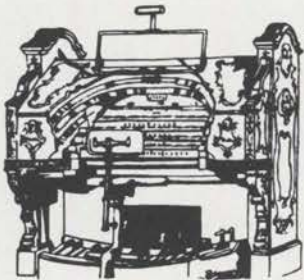
large organ of a famous make. The organist was famous as one of Chicago's great church organists. Al's parents decided that to become such an organist was a proper goal for their young son.

When he was about 15 years of age arrangements were made for Al to become a pupil of this great organist. Al made rapid progress, but soon one of his talents got him into trouble. On occasion the organist gave recitals on

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the church organ, playing the ponderous offerings of the great composers. Bach was his favorite and he played at least one Bach number at each recital. Al Melgard practiced his lessons on the same church organ, or was suppose to practice — scales, diverging themes, pedal exercises, and so on — as directed by the master organist.

[One day when the master organist] visited the church he was amazed to hear Melgard playing the Bach



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The stadium Barton console on its platform high above the seats.

(Bill Lamb photo)

composition the master had played at his last recital — and without music. The master organist had no more use for an organist who could improvise than he had for use of the tremolo when using a solo stop. Perhaps he was slightly “put out” to discover a teen-age kid playing a composition he had spent endless hours of practice to perfect, and from memory. Melgard had attended the recital and had been present when the great organist had been practicing the Bach composition. No doubt Al slipped up on a few passages, but nevertheless he played the difficult Bach composition from start to finish. The teacher and student had a quick understanding and Al had to stay with the notes, scales and pedal exercises from then on.

Al told me of this while relating his experience in trying to become a church organist, a good illustration of his natural ability to absorb and retain music. There are many such examples. Melgard and I attended many musical shows together. He would hum to himself during the show, not loud, but enough to make you wonder whether he was slightly “off his rocker.” He was absorbing the music. The next morning he would play the entire music score on our office organ. This happened many times.

Al Melgard never made it as a great church organist, but he did become assistant organist in one of Chicago’s larger churches. His duties consisted of playing the organ when the choir rehearsed, sitting in a secluded place

during organ recitals ready to race to the organ lofts and pull a pipe when a cipher showed up, and waiting for the head organist to get old enough to retire. Al says he attended a meeting of a church organist guild and when he saw how old a man could be and still be a church organist, he gave up.

He applied for a position playing in a theatre on the Ascher Brothers Circuit, following the action of the silent pictures. There was no orchestra and the organs were church organs with no orchestral stops or percussions. Al had a head full of tunes and a fine technique acquired from his church organ work. He was soon Ascher’s top organist.

When the stadium organ was completed in 1929, who would preside at the huge console with its six manuals and over 800 stops? There was not even a second thought — Al Melgard. For over 30 years Al and the giant Barton organ have been a feature at the stadium, a world’s record for unit organ players. During his career at the stadium Al has played for both Republican and Democratic national conventions, circuses, ice shows, boxing, wrestling, religious meetings, hockey, basketball, tennis matches and pro football, adding up to the greatest variety of attractions ever handled by any organist.

Al has made many recordings on the stadium organ, several of which have been best sellers among organ recordings. At present, he records for Audio Fidelity, Inc. In addition to his

stadium work, Al has a school where he is coach and instructor for advanced organ. This school has been so successful Al now has three assistants.

In my long experience in the theatre organ business, Melgard comes the closest to having “perfect” pitch of all the organists I know. He would sit in my office with the door closed and call correctly any note that was sounded on the office organ. His phenomenal hearing enabled him to find out-of-tune pipes which sounded in tune to others.

He is the same good natured fellow today that he was when I first met him over 35 years ago. Al may play a big organ, but his hat is the same size it was when he started working for the Barton Organ Company so long ago. Truly a great organist playing the world’s largest unit organ — my friend, Al Melgard.

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Alfred M. “Al” Melgard, dean of Chicago theatre organists, died July 8, 1977, in a Las Vegas nursing home following a prolonged illness. He had retired to that city in 1973 after a tenure of almost 45 years as head organist at the Chicago Stadium. He was born in Denmark on October 4, 1890, and came to America at age seven. □

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Al Melgard and Dan Barton, photographed in 1965.
(Bill Lamb photo)

