

# HE BROUGHT THE PIPELESS ORGAN INTO ENTERTAINMENT

by Wilfred Hosteland



Ken Griffin

It is very strange indeed, that this remarkable organist with his unparalleled popularity and straight-forward organ stylings, has never, until now, been the subject of an article in any of the many organ publications in the U.S.A. and Europe.

Ken Griffin was originally among the early theatre organists, but was not well known as such, and he never recorded the theatre organ. There can be no doubt though, that he was the greatest of the early Hammond organists, and the most popular in the U.S.A. for more than a decade. His output of recordings was considerable, his work appearing on many labels, and they helped to make his music famous all over the world both with the old Hammond tonewheel organs and the Wurlitzer electric reed organ.

Kenneth Wilson Griffin was born in Columbia, Missouri, December 28, 1909. There are no details of his early years, but at the age of 12 he began to study the violin. A few years later he became a professional playing with Warner's Orchestra in Little Rock, Arkansas, and at 17, fascinated by the

organ and its fantastic possibilities, he began to teach himself to play it.

He started his first training in the theatre of the old Steelworks YMCA, owned and operated by the Colorado Fuel & Iron Co. This theatre was for the use of employees at the Pueblo Steelworks, and their families. Ken's mother was employed in the Steelworks' cafeteria and Ken used to practice on the theatre's organ while waiting for her. Sometimes he was joined by a girl friend who, like Ken, could also play piano and they worked on the organ together.

The career of Ken Griffin began when he was employed at the old Colorado Theatre, first as an usher and then as organist. He was fascinated by the organ playing of a man named John Winter and, after about a year of training, he was good enough to replace Winter at the Colorado Theatre.

This movie theatre was located in a business block at the principal downtown intersection in Pueblo. During the next four years, he played in various theatres on the Paramount-Public chain through the Rocky Moun-

tain area. In 1930, when sound films replaced organists in the movie houses, Ken came upon lean years, six of them until 1936, when the portable Hammond organ came onto the market and the new possibility of taking the organ to places where it had never been heard before was opened up. Until 1942, Ken was kept busy in and around Chicago, traveling with his Hammond in a trailer.

He entered the Army in 1942 and was assigned to Special Services and sent to Camp Barkley, Texas, with 70,000 soldiers and 30,000 civilians; plenty of people to play for! Of course, with his musical ability, he stood out from the crowd, and this consequently kept him at Camp Barkley, in Special Services, until the end of the war. In the meantime, however, he met a tragi-comic problem! After the day's work he would play for his own amusement for hours, and as the camp had nine chapels, each with an organ, he had plenty of instruments upon which to play, but he came to be barred from each of them!

The authorities objected to him



playing "swing" organ around midnight, and there were one or two people who felt the chapel organs should not be used for secular music anyhow! So Ken was asked not to play, and he gave up the hope of playing at regular Sunday services. However, he must have acted upon the advice given in the old adage, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em," for from then on he included several hymns in his wide repertory.

Ken Griffin developed "flying fever" around the end of the war, and used to hang about at the Municipal Airport and watch planes come and go. He wanted to take flying lessons from Roscoe Turner under the G.I. bill, but the government had not at that time approved that particular branch of learning.

Upon discharge, he immediately went back to solo organ work. He played the Sheraton and Albert Pick Hotel chains, and in the Antlers Hotel in Indianapolis, moving next to Broadway with an engagement at Jack Dempsey's. Following this he went back to Chicago, and in a casual moment turned out a recording called "You Can't Be True, Dear." This tune Ken picked up from a German habitué of a Halstead Street tavern in Chicago, and recorded it for Rondo on New Year's Eve, 1947, just a few hours before the Petrillo ban which stymied the record business in 1948 came into force.

Ken wrote the interlude (the part between the choruses) and the English words of the vocal version himself, and he arranged it for a modern dance orchestra. Two versions were recorded; one with Ken alone at the Hammond, and one with vocal by Jerry Wayne, who also whistled in parts of it. The solo version was Ken Griffin's first recorded tune and both versions sold in millions, becoming America's top hit of 1948. The tune, of which the original German title was "Du kannst nicht treu sein," was composed by Hans Otten, and was first published in 1935. It was reissued in 1948 by Biltmore Music (ASCAP), and again in 1976 by Essex Music, Inc.

In the first years of his recording career, Ken played under the labels of Rondo, Broadcast, Brunswick, Philips, Embassy, Esquire and Chicago Recording Studios, and from April 18, 1950, on Columbia. Ken Griffin recordings featured several other artists, musicians and vocalists on some of them, such as Jerry Wayne, Johnny Hill, Johnny Knapp and Marion Spelman (all vocalists), The Songsmiths and The Johnny Byrn Quintet. He also made recordings with other singers and with Andy Nelson, Hawaiian guitar; Earl Backus, guitar; H. Moss, celeste; Carl Asercion, steel guitar; The Cosmopolitans, accordion; and others with chimes, bells and electric piano. Ken himself also played the piano on some of his recordings and he even sang to his own playing with the tune "O Why Did I Kiss That Girl?"

He played in hotels, clubs, restaurants, etc., all over the States, but mostly in the Midwest and East Coast areas. He was only once outside the U.S.A., when playing in Windsor, Ontario, just across the border from Detroit. In December, 1952, Ken organized a band and took it on the road for a trial run. It went so well that he repeated it in the spring of 1953. Early that year, he was playing in a club at Jack Ensley's in the then new smart Jaguar Room located at 2421 North Meridian Street, Indianapolis. Here he was interviewed by the *Indianapolis Star* (February 11, 1953) and quoted as saying, "I love to play anyplace where people listen to me." In fact, few solo instrumentalists have given so much pleasure to so many people as Ken Griffin. In the Jaguar Room, Ken played many numbers on request, and the writer in the *Star* remarked, "Requests don't stump organist Ken Griffin." Another journalist writing in *Variety* on January 17, 1951 (when Ken was playing at the Hotel Nicollet in Minneapolis) said, "The public finds him a personable, unassuming chap whose organ emanations have the same appeal when delivered in person as they have had on discs."

Within a year, Ken made two appearances at the Oriental Theatre in Chicago, and made many radio and TV broadcasts. In 1955, he became the star in his own TV show "67 Melody Lane." Thirteen 15-minute programs were planned and partly sponsored by the Wurlitzer Company. The shows were a refreshing musical variety. The fast-moving format included an average of four musical selections interwoven with a thread of comedy. Anything could happen in the programs, thanks to Sterling, Ken's zany business manager, who eventually got Ken involved in some amusing situations. Others in the show included lovely Kathy, Ken's girl-Friday; Martha, the devoted housekeeper; and Chuck-the-Duck, Ken's aspiring web-footed co-star! Also, Ken was visited by many guest stars of the musical profession, and other people. However, the series was never finished. Later, CBS introduced a long-play recording titled "67 Melody Lane," which contained many of the tunes from the TV series, played by Ken on a Wurlitzer 4600 electric reed organ, as in the shows.

Ken composed many good tunes, some of which can be heard on his recordings. The best known were "Lonesome," "Louisiana Waltz," "Kringle's Jingle," "Symphony in 3/4 Time," "Tears Never Lie," "Jukebox Polka," "Oh, Ma Kodi Polka," "Black Beauty March," "The Griffin Blues," "Polka Pops," "Bumble Bee on a Bender," "You're My Love Song" and "Hawaiian Echo." He also arranged much of his recorded music. By 1955, sales of his recordings totalled about 11 million, and his total output of tunes would have filled nearly 50 LP's. New albums from earlier tapes are still released from time to time.

The best years for Ken Griffin must undoubtedly have been those after 1948, for then his recordings came to be heard by millions from phonographs, jukeboxes and radio, and at skating rinks, football games, racer shows, etc. He was then, in fact, the most popular organist in the United States. However, in his later years, he became very disappointed that he could not make another hit recording. In 1956, he had just signed a new ten-year contract with Columbia when the following short announcement appeared in papers and magazines:

"Ken Griffin, 46, organist, who in

**All inquiries regarding membership matters should be addressed to . . .**

Douglas C. Fisk  
Executive Director of ATOS  
P.O. Box 420490  
Sacramento, California 95842



recent years has played a number of agricultural fairs, and for many years the organist at the Old Heidelberg Restaurant, 14 East Randolph Street, Chicago, died last night in Wesley Memorial Hospital, Chicago, after a heart attack earlier in his home. Mr. Griffin had been a Columbia recording artist whose disks enjoyed wide popularity over the years."

He died on the night of March 11, 1956. His home for the last 16 years of his life was at 1617 East 50th Place, Chicago. His burial was mentioned in the papers on March 14, and in musical magazines after that.

Ken Griffin rests in Lincoln Memorial Park, Oswego, Illinois — 40 miles west of Chicago.

Mention should perhaps be made

here of a later recording, "Enduring Hymns," which introduced Ken's nephew, Kirby Griffin. Each played one side of this record. Later, a few recordings of Kirby Griffin at the Hammond appeared, and the style of playing was much like Ken's.

Several other organists in the U.S.A. made recordings as "tributes" to Ken Griffin. Among them were Ashley Tappen, and later Grant Ashley and Beverly Henning, all playing in the Griffin style at the Hammond. □

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## Questions and Answers on the Technical Side

by Lance Johnson



### Do you have any questions?

Send them direct to:

**QUIZMASTER  
and Organbuilder**

**LANCE JOHNSON  
Box 1228  
Fargo, North Dakota 58102**

*Please include name, address  
and telephone number (with  
area code).*

I would appreciate any help readers can give me as to the number of ranks in the following organs, as installed by the Wurlitzer factory:

Granada Theatre,  
Santa Barbara, California  
Keith's, Rochester, New York  
20th Century Theatre,  
Johannesburg, South Africa

Some are still having problems with the disassembly and assembly of Spencer blowers. Here are some tips:

1. Be sure that you label the shim-washers under the motor as

you loosen the mounts. They must be put back exactly as they came out so that the motor will rest evenly on the mounts.

2. Be careful not to bend or damage the long shaft. Never lift the motor by the shaft except near the motor itself.
3. When you install the motor, be sure the shaft is on center with the tank. The distance in or out of the housing is not critical.
4. When installing the impellers, make sure that they are spaced exactly 1/2" to the rear of the dividers and outer housing before tightening the hub. Be sure hub arrow lines up with the scratch line on the motor shaft.
5. Be sure that the motor rotates in the proper direction. The tangent of the impeller should rotate toward the discharge chute.
6. Make sure the motor is well secured and the discharge chute is closed off before starting the motor. Failure to close the discharge

could burn out the motor quickly. It would be like putting a heavy load on the motor which was more than it could handle, so that it could not run up to full speed. Keep in mind that the blower was designed to run connected to a closed system. If the blower discharge is not connected, the fans are forced to push large volumes of air through the blower, which it cannot do.

**Q.** Our chapter is about to face a massive re-leathering job on our chapter organ. Our question is, does treating newly-installed leather (pneumatic, cabretta or gusset) with a leather preservative such as mink oil or silicone significantly improve the life of leather?

**A.** To obtain some expert help on this one, I contacted Randy Wagner of Organ Supply Industries, who has used leather treatment, as have his co-workers. There has never been conclusive proof that any oil treatments such as neatsfoot oil, silicone, egg white or rubber cement increases the life of organ leather. As organ leather is treated with acid in order to get rid of undesirable characteristics such as hair and odors, the acid will also work on the leather and perhaps shorten its life. Any time that a moisture agent can be added, this can help neutralize the effects of the acid and keep the leather supple. A good pair of shoes which gets an occasional polish, or a catcher's mitt treated with neatsfoot oil, will seemingly last forever. Back in the days when the supply firms were making high pressure chests, they always applied thinned-out rubber cement or egg white to leather when the pressure was to be 8" or higher. This makes the leather more airtight for a quick action, and it has always been thought that this treatment also enhanced the life of the leather. On the other hand, theatre organs without primaries and with airtight leather have another problem — the action is quick to start but slow releasing.

### Troubleshooting Guide Quiz Question

While playing the organ, you get an intermittent cipher, what could cause this? □

Answer on page 55.