

A Hollywood Star Moves to Ohio

by Gary Konas
Photos by Jeff Sprang

Early in 1929, a 3/18 Wurlitzer, Opus 2022, was installed in Warner Brothers' Hollywood studio for scoring talkies and beefing up the studio orchestra sound. More than 2000 miles away, in Mansfield, Ohio, the Ohio Theatre — just one year old itself — had a 3/10 Kimball to entertain moviegoers. Two very different and seemingly unrelated installations, right? Sure, but paths do have a way of crossing in the organ world.

During the past 56 years, both the Ohio and this particular Wurlitzer have had their ups and downs; both have faced uncertain futures. In 1985, however, the Ohio — now aptly renamed the Renaissance Theatre — is a beautifully restored performing arts center, and Opus 2022 has taken up residence there as a valuable community resource.

Except for the New York Paramount studio organ on which Jesse Crawford made so many recordings, Opus 2022 may be the best known studio organ of them all. In the 1930s, Americans stopped whatever they were doing

at 7:00 p.m. and turned on the "Amos 'n' Andy" radio program, which opened with Gaylord Carter playing "The Perfect Song" on the Warner studio Wurlitzer.

In 1948, after using the organ nightly for many years, Warner Brothers sold it to KNX, the local CBS affiliate. The organ lay in storage until actor Joseph Kearns heard that it was available. Kearns, best known for his roles as the vault-keeper on the Jack Benny radio show and as Mr. Wilson on TV's "Dennis the Menace" series, had been a professional theatre organist in Utah. Kearns bought the Wurlitzer in February of 1955, even though he had no place to put it.

Since he had no home for the organ, he built one, a three-story house in Hollywood designed specifically for the organ. The lower level was the garage, but also housed the main chamber, relay room and blower room. The second level consisted of a kitchen, the solo chamber, and a 15' by 30' living room which included the console and a grand piano that Kearns added. Sound from the main chamber below came up through a tone chute. The bedrooms and an echo chamber were on the

third level.

The organ, including eight added ranks, became playable in early 1956. During the next few years, many notable theatre organists, including George Wright, Al Bollington, and Johnny Duffy, made recordings. But Kearns died suddenly, and his dream appeared to be over. People who cared little about organs bought the house, and it sat vacant, a tempting target for vandals.

Fortunately, W. S. "Stu" Green came to the rescue. He knew a couple of Los Angeles newcomers, Bob and Ruth Carson, who were organ enthusiasts looking for a home. Stu recommended the Kearns residence, and they promptly moved in.

Most well-known organists, even such classical greats as Virgil Fox and Richard Ellsasser, visited the Carson home. In 1964 Lyn Larsen made the first of his many LPs on Opus 2022 under the Malar Label that Lyn owned but later sold to Bob for \$2. Even though he had a 3/30 studio organ of his own, George Wright made his "Sounds of Love" album on the Carson Wurlitzer; evidently he felt the subtle tonal nuances of the organ were

Architect's drawing of the facade of the Renaissance Theatre, showing the connecting walkway to the Holiday Inn on the right. (Alexander-Seckel, Architects)



well-suited to the collection of ballads he chose for that album.

Although the Kearns/Carson Wurlitzer became one of the most popular in the country, misfortune began to strike. First, Ruth Carson died, and Bob turned to his work for comfort. In late 1972 the situation seemed to brighten when Helen Dell, one of many who had recorded the organ under the Malar label and who had helped run the Malar business after Ruth's death, married Bob Carson. Sadly, though, Bob died in 1975. The house, however, had already been vacant for several months, because the building's owners had raised the rent to a prohibitive level, and the Carsons had been forced to move out.

The organ was forced to move, too, for the house was to be razed in favor of a new housing development. The organ went into storage and was sold to a pizza/pipes partnership headed by Ron Walls. Through business reversals, Walls lost the organ, and it was purchased by the Renaissance Theatre, Inc., a group that prepared the third, and one hopes permanent, home for Opus 2022.

During this time of trouble for the Kearns/Carson Wurlitzer, the Ohio Theatre in Mansfield was having its own problems. In fact, by 1979 the theatre was run-down and showing X-rated movies. *Deep Throat* was the last of the X's; public protest closed the theatre.

Fifty years earlier, none of the 30,000 residents of the city located midway between Columbus and Cleveland would have envisioned such a fate. On opening night, January 19, 1928, thousands turned out in a snowstorm, and the next day the theatre ran an apology in the local paper to those who had been unable to get in the night before.

The Ohio was one of those grand, opulent theatres that \$500,000 could buy in the 1920s. Overlooking the 1500 seats was a lead crystal chandelier weighing 3000 pounds — including its 105 light bulbs. It illuminated the Grand

Baroque interior, including the silk side panels, gold leaf, shell motif, and muted colors of dusty rose and turquoise.

The theatre returned a profit during its first 20 years, but it gradually declined as television became popular. The Kimball was removed, and the decline continued until the theatre seemingly uttered its final gasp with *Deep Throat*.

Ironically, though, while TV hurt, and while the theatre was finally closed in response to the exhibition of women on screen, it reopened with the exhibition of women on TV: in 1980 the Miss Ohio Pageant was staged at the Ohio. The theatre was cleaned up to make it presentable for the television cameras, and people had the opportunity to see that the Ohio was a potential asset to the city.

In August of 1980, an anonymous benefactor helped turn potential into reality by buying the Ohio Theatre and presenting it to the non-profit Renaissance Theatre, Inc., a group originally formed to save another local theatre. Other donations followed, and repairs began. The theatre was renamed the Renaissance to reflect the city's renewed interest in theatre arts.

In December of 1983, a fund raising campaign was begun to raise \$1.6 million to finance restoration of the theatre primarily into a house for live entertainment, but with auxiliary uses as an educational center, a community auditorium, and, in conjunction with the adjoining Holiday Inn, a convention/trade center.

The theatre has been used increasingly during these years of restoration. In 1980, for example, 21 events were held, with a total attendance of 12,000, while in 1983, 88 events attracted a total of 90,000. The Renaissance is the home of the Mansfield Symphony Orchestra, and a variety of nationally known artists, ranging from Itzhak Perlman to Johnny Cash, have performed at the Renaissance.



The crystal chandelier in the auditorium of the Renaissance Theatre. (Jeff Sprang photo)

Theatre organ enthusiasts are undoubtedly most interested in what was done to prepare for the organ. Fortunately, not much needed to be done, as there were already two chambers in the theatre. A fire escape was relocated to enlarge the main chamber and make room for extra ranks. Also, closets that were originally used to house tremms and muffle their sound were removed. Finally, a new lift was installed that allows the console to descend farther into the pit than did the original.

The organ was restored by master organ technician Ken Crome, who said that, rather than make major changes in the organ, his job was to restore it to its original condition. The console, for example, has an ivory finish as it had when it was in the Warner Brothers studio. The console was totally rebuilt, and an electronic combination action replaced the old pneumatic one. Ken replaced the original pedalboard with a standard AGO one. Lyn Larsen, who has been involved in other restoration projects during the past few years, drew up the new specifications.

The installation is a 3/20 — basically a Style 260 plus the Brass Saxophone and Kinura that Kearns added. Six other ranks that Kearns added were not of the best quality, and Ken decided not to use them. Otherwise, only minor changes were made in the pipework. The English Horn rank, which several organists had remarked needed work, was voiced by the Trivo company. It is installed off trem. Ken put the strings on their own trem, and added an extra regulator. The blower and toy counter are original.

When asked whether there might be a problem with a studio organ speaking into a medium-sized theatre instead of the small room that it was presumably designed for, or the living room it spent many years in, Ken answered emphatically not. Wurlitzer made

Lyn Larsen chats with the audience during the dedication concert.

(Jeff Sprang photo)



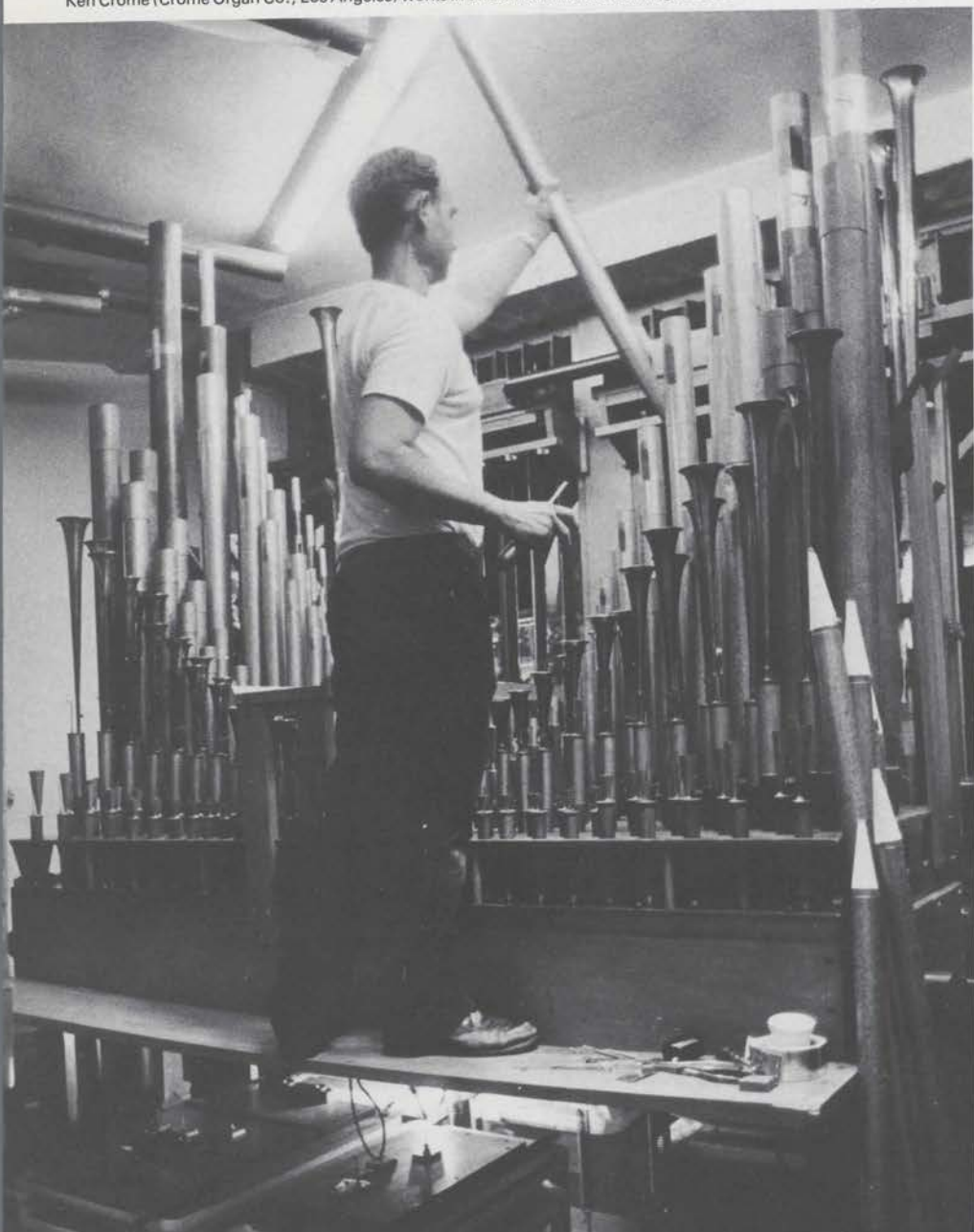


View of the front of the house, Renaissance Theatre. The black box above the proscenium houses speakers.

(Jeff Sprang photo)

Ken Crome (Crome Organ Co., Los Angeles) works in one of the chambers during installation.

(Jeff Sprang photo)



very few changes for studio organs, and only small ones, such as equipping the studio model with a metal Diaphone instead of a wooden one. Most importantly, wind pressures were the same.

On May 17 there was a full house of very enthusiastic patrons hearing the Warner/Kearns/Carson Wurlitzer come to life again with Lyn Larsen at the console. It was a night of nostalgia for many. Mr. Larsen was again playing on the friend he knew while living in the Robert Carson home. Also in the audience was Donna Parker, who had been a student of Lyn's and played this same organ. And there was Buddy Nolan, who was a close friend of Joe Kearns and had spent many an evening entertaining Joe and his friends. They are all very eager to again play their old friend. And that will come in the future.

The organ is used for the summer movie series, and for preludes to other programs, including the Mansfield Symphony Orchestra and the Bob Hope Benefit Show for the theatre.

Dennis James played on August 24, 1985. The first of a series of four winter programs began with Dave Weingartner on October 5, to be followed by Hector Olivera, Rex Koury and Ron Rhode for the 1985-1986 season.

The main objective of the Renaissance Theatre Organ Association is to encourage and develop local talent, which has already begun. □



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