

# The Phoenix Festival Was Fantastic!

by Grace E. McGinnis



Bill Brown leaves the console of the Phoenix Organ Stop Wurlitzer after playing for the Jam Session.



Ron Rhode at the console of the Mesa Organ Stop Wurlitzer acknowledges the applause of his audience.

Walt Strony chaired the festival as well as playing a concert at the Phoenix Organ Stop.



From registration to Rawhide, the weekend in Phoenix was nothing short of remarkable. There was time for relaxation, for socializing, for pleasant dining and for some unexcelled organ music. The Embassy Suites Hotel was distinctive, and the service was first class; free breakfasts were served each morning and free cocktails were available from 5:30 to 7:00 each evening. The five-story atrium lobby was also a lounge where we could meet and visit at any time. Large pools with goldfish watching us and massive tropical plants brought the outdoors in and made the whole area rather like a park. A computerized fountain in the center kept changing from soft to loud splashing and necessitated the modulation of conversation to compensate.

Bus-boarding time on Friday afternoon brought a delightful surprise. There was our friend from the Indianapolis Convention, Alden Stockebrand, orchestrating the loading process and moving the buses smoothly out into traffic for the ride to the Organ Stop Restaurant. We were certain, at that time, that transportation would be well-timed and efficient. And it was!

Affable Tom Hazleton opened the festivities with his unique classical and traditional arrangements and flamboyant stylings. The 4/33 Wurlitzer in the Phoenix Organ Stop has an unenclosed Trumpet en Chamade above and behind the audience, and those of us who did not know this and sat in the back of the room fairly flew out of our seats at Tom's first fanfare. It took a bit of time for us to settle down and enjoy the rest of the program, but we did!

The Friday evening program for our group was Lew Williams at Bill Brown's 5/22 Wurlitzer. Lew's program reflected the relaxed

and unhurried mood which prevailed in Phoenix. There was even time during intermission for theatre organ buffs to tour the chambers, and Mr. and Mrs. Brown were most gracious hosts. Just enough rain fell on the patio and pool outside the living room that those from the Northwest felt quite at home.

Friday's third event was a Jam Session at the Organ Stop in Mesa. Ron Rhode, one of the owners of this restaurant, opened the session with a lively "Singin' in The Rain." Other participants were Patti Simon, Walt Strony, Kevin King, Andy Crow, Jane McKee Johnson and Homer Johnson. Ron Rhode then introduced soprano Barbara Clark, one of their employees, who delighted the audience with several vocal selections accompanied by Ron. The evening ended with a wake-up rendition of "Stars and Stripes Forever," which sent us back to the hotel with the feeling that we had just experienced a musical smorgasbord; we were happily and pleasantly stuffed!

Saturday morning brought one of the most interesting programs we have attended in a long time. Ron Rhode interviewed Betty Gould, a truly bright and charming early theatre organist whose stories and commentaries could have held our attention for the entire morning. One would hope that this lady's words might be recorded and/or published to reach the widest possible audience. Following this captivating interview, Tim Needler moderated a panel discussion with four of the festival organists, Ron Rhode, Walt Strony, Lew Williams and Lowell Ayars. Questions were submitted in advance, and Tim moved efficiently to cover as many as possible in the time allowed. The artists had some strong (and

L to R: Tim Needler, Lew Williams, Walt Strony and Lowell Ayars in a panel discussion of questions submitted by attendees.





most interesting) opinions about how advance technology will affect the theatre organ scene, what we can do to keep theatre organs alive and well, what annoys performing artists and how they cope with different organs on which they perform around the country. This type of presentation provides much food for thought for those of us who love the theatre organ.

Our afternoon entertainment was a concert by Walt Strony at the Phoenix Organ Stop. Walt and this 4/33 are so compatible and his arrangements are so expressive that we were reminded again of the theme of this festival,



Lowell Ayars at the First Christian Church 2/9 Wurlitzer.



Carlo Curley arrives at the Embassy Suites Hotel prior to his concert at Valley of the Sun Center with Lyn Larsen.

Tom Hazleton opens the Phoenix Festival at the Phoenix Organ Stop Wurlitzer.



“A Celebration of Excellence.” Walt made it just that!

That night our group went to the First Christian Church where Lowell Ayars performed on their 2/9 (not quite finished) Wurlitzer. Lowell has a gift for making small organs sound just right, and his selections were most appropriate for this instrument; he played medleys which were gentle, mellow and sentimental.

The second Jam Session filled the Phoenix Organ Stop and was set off by Ty Woodward with a rollicking number from *A Chorus Line*. ATOS President Jack Moelmann then took the console followed by Kurt von Schakel, Lew Williams, Bill Brown and Don Myers. The Organ Stop owns some glass sing-along slides and we sang to the accompaniment of Lew Williams. ATOS members can sing, too!

Sunday morning was clear and sunny, and the ride to Mesa allowed us to appreciate all of the mountains surrounding Phoenix and to realize why so many people opt to winter there. Ron Rhode was in top form at the console of the Mesa Wurlitzer, and an added feature, a brilliant young jazz harpist, Park Stickney, brought a sparkling dimension to the usual concert format. His “Take Five” was a real show-stopper.

The Valley of The Sun Center was the locale of the Lyn Larsen/Carlo Curley Grand Finale of the Festival. Lyn at the 3/16 Wurlitzer and Carlo on an Allen 8000 rattled the rafters with their duet of Leroy Anderson’s “Fiddle Faddle.” At this program Convention Chairman Walt Strony presented ATOS President Jack Moelmann a check for \$1000 to add to the fund for the Young Organist Competition. Larsen and Curley wound up the affair with a matchless *William Tell Overture*. A spectacular finish to a weekend that was close to being perfect.

The Afterglow found us at a Western movie set — or a reasonable facsimile of same — for a genuine Western Barbeque. A three-piece combo provided musical atmosphere as hardy conventioners stowed away steak, beans, salad and (What’s this?) French fries. Western hospitality was the name of the game, and some 300 enthusiasts had been filled with music, food and fellowship. What more could we ask?

Walt Strony and his crew deserve the highest kudoes for this production. There was music for every taste by some of the finest organ-

ists in the country on pipe organs that are lovingly cared for by skilled technicians. Could there be a more auspicious combination? Madeline LiVolsi made registration a pleasure, and Alden Stockebrand conducted the busses like the maestro he is. Chapter hosts and hostesses were always available to answer questions and help us find the rest rooms. Bill and Barbara Brown opened their home to 300 pairs of wet feet and eager ears; Phoenix is fortunate to have friends of this calibre who support and promote theatre organ. There are certainly others who made this festival successful, and to all of them we wish to express our gratitude for an unforgettable, fantastic three days.

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Lew Williams and Bill Brown in front of the Browns’ Wurlitzer.



Theatre organist Betty Gould accepts roses from Ron Rhode after being interviewed for the ATOS guests.

ATOS President Jack Moelmann accepts donation for Young Organist Competition from Phoenix Festival Chairman Walt Strony.

