



# THERE IS ONLY ONE BILLY NALLE!

(Dan Moore photo)

by Dan Bellomy

"There is only one Billy Nalle!" a friend in Wichita, Kansas, said as he handed me an album of that name. I didn't realize until I got home and played the recording that no truer statement could have been made. As I listened I became an avid fan and admirer of this man and his work.

Billy Nalle was born April 24, 1921, in Fort Myers, Florida, the son of Porter and Nancy Jennings Nalle. His family had only recently moved there from Culpeper, Virginia, to start a new business.

Shortly after his third birthday, Billy's parents took him to a band concert. The next afternoon, Billy climbed onto the piano stool in his home and played both the melody and bass notes of "America" in the same key, Gb, in which he had heard the band play it. His parents were not in the room; each thought the other was playing and wondered what prompted it. In conversation at dinner that evening it soon became evident that it had been Billy playing the piano. This unexpected display of musical talent prompted his parents to engage a local teacher to help Billy learn to read music.

In November of 1925, at the age of four, Billy played his first public concert. It was a program of popular music played on the grand piano of the Fort Myers Pleasure Pier as one of the winter events presented annually

for the influx of tourists. Billy played more and more in the next few years for a great variety of civic, school and privately sponsored programs, even accompanying entire musical revues presented by the junior and senior high schools.

At the age of 11, a most unlikely opportunity developed for Billy in an emergency caused by the death of the pianist for the Allyn Linquist Orchestra, a crack jazz group just formed. With only days before the orchestra's debut at an important dance, Linquist was persuaded to audition the 11-year-old boy only after considerable effort from other group members who knew of Billy's playing. After arrangements were made for his school work and other obligations, Billy won the post. He was learning to read orchestra "sheets" (scores) only slowly, but this was unknown to Linquist because his new, young pianist was playing with the group mostly by ear. One evening during a local dance engagement, someone opened a stage door near the piano and Billy's music went flying, but he never paused in his playing. When asked how long this had been going on, Billy confessed that over half of the longer, more complicated new scores he'd not had time to read because of his school schedule, and was taking his cues from hearing the other instruments play. Billy played in this orchestra until the end of his last year in high school.

Billy was graduated from high school in

1939. In the fall of 1940, he entered The Juilliard School in New York City. In the interval Billy studied classical organ and piano with Eddie Ford, the organist of the Tampa Theatre in Tampa, Florida. From Ford, a graduate of the Yale School of Music, Billy learned enough classical organ and piano pieces to pass the entrance examinations in New York. One morning during a practice session Ford caught Billy playing popular music on the Wurlitzer, instead of the classical pieces on which he had been strictly admonished to concentrate. Allowing him to finish, Ford glared at him, then laughed and said, "Stop horsing around and get back to work!" Some years later, Ford told Billy's father that what he'd heard Billy do in that episode told him that theatre organ would win over classical organ in Billy's life. During the time in Tampa, Billy played in a fine jazz trio and in the last two months played afternoon intermissions at the Tampa on the Wurlitzer, including some duets with Eddie Ford on the organ and Billy on piano.

At Juilliard, Billy had a double major, piano and organ, both with the legendary Gaston Dethier, jazz performance with the great jazz pianist Teddy Wilson, and composition with Vittorio Gianinni. Billy tells a story about the weekly school assemblies, at which it was the custom for an organ student to open with the national anthem on the big Casavant organ in the concert hall. By the beginning of

his second year, it had come his turn to play the anthem, music he had always disliked. However, he had heard Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony play it with the tempo and gusto that seemed to make it come alive. So, one memorable morning, Billy launched into it on the big classical organ, leaving the assembly behind in its singing, startling, but pleasing, everyone, especially the school dean, George Wedge. Afterward, Billy was called to the dean's office where he was congratulated for the "first time that thing ever sounded like music in this school," and was asked to coach the other piano and organ students in playing the piece so they "would avoid being crashing bores when they played it."

Before being accepted into Teddy Wilson's class, Billy had to audition. He so admired Wilson that he was afraid he would "black out" when trying to play before him, so he chose a piece he felt he could play while half asleep and get through it. The result was Billy's arrangement of "Body and Soul," not unusual in itself, except that it was in the key of B natural. That, in turn, was nothing special to Billy who had played in any key by ear since childhood, but it was a key seldom used

by keyboard musicians. When Billy had finished his audition, Teddy turned to his assistant and said, "Hey, that was a marvelous arrangement, but whoever heard of playing it in B natural!" Billy was admitted, and some years later Teddy said, "Whenever Billy wants to get to any place on a keyboard, he can find ways from here to there that knock you out!"

Just after World War II Billy received the "Friendly Invitation" from Uncle Sam. He chose to go into the Navy and, immediately after the horrors of boot camp, was selected by the entertainment division in Washington to join a musical show, *Hook, Line and Sinker*, composed entirely of Navy personnel. Its dance group was headed by Bob Fosse who was to gain fame later as a New York and motion picture dance producer. The instrumental combo, with Billy on piano, was headed by Armand Anelli, second trumpet with the Harry James Orchestra. The vocalist was Bobby Beers, from the Lawrence Welk Orchestra. For 18 months this show toured most of the Pacific Ocean areas, from Guam and the Truk Islands to all the islands of Hawaii and various remote spots that civilian shows were not allowed to visit during the postwar

period.

The tour, with everyone and gear carted in anything that would fly and not flounder in landing on water, covered 28,000 miles. Only in Hawaii did Billy find pianos tuned to standard pitch. The farther west the group went, the worse and older the pianos were. Some were nearly two whole pitches flat, meaning that Billy had to transpose all the music high enough to reach the register in which the other instruments could play it.

After his discharge from the Navy, Billy returned to The Juilliard School for two years of postgraduate work, while also starting to look for musical work. He auditioned for the talent coordinator of NBC-TV and was offered a job as pianist for the new musical show *Young Broadway*, which had just lost its pianist. His duties included occasional piano solos, as well as accompanying many famous vocal and instrumental musicians who were guests. Billy's efforts on this show impressed its director, Ralph Nelson, who was later to become noted for such films as *Lilies of the Field* and *Embryo*, the television production *Cinderella* and other work. During Billy's second year in television, Nelson left to direct the Maxwell House-sponsored network drama at CBS-TV, *I Remember Mama*. Dissatisfied with the first organist playing the Friday evening program because he sounded like soap opera, Nelson convinced the producer, Carol Irwin, to take a new musician with only one year of television playing experience. Billy was nervous thinking about his first network television program, and Carol Irwin was even more nervous. It took about a month before Billy and Carol relaxed and realized that all was going extremely well; the cast seemed delighted and content with music it felt was "right." The success grew and grew, keeping the show on the air for eight years.

Billy's television playing steadily brought him solo spots, at first on piano and later on organ. He was also engaged to play such shows as *Suspense*, *Kraft Theatre*, *Hallmark Hall of Fame*, *Studio One* (the long-running CBS dramatic series), the *Virginia Gilmore Show*, the *Ilka Chase Show*, the *Ed Sullivan Show* (both in the orchestra and as soloist on organ) and more than 220 others. He was on the air almost 6000 times from the fall of 1949 to 1970.

In one *Kraft Theatre* show, Jack Lemmon played the part of a concert pianist, despondent about his failing career, who killed himself with a gun while playing his piano at home. Billy rehearsed Jack in a sequence of suitable keyboard playing motions, intending to synchronize with them on the piano behind the scene. During the telecast, Lemmon became caught up in the drama of creating his impending "suicide" and lost all continuity of playing sequence. Billy had to make musical results coincide with the character and register of Jack's playing and managed to synchronize with one of the most bizarre episodes in all his television experience, much to the director's delight and Jack's relief!

Virginia Gilmore had a combination music and interview show for which Billy was often

Billy rehearsing for a U.S. Navy show, Florida Theatre, Jacksonville, mid-'40s. 3/14 Wurlitzer.



engaged to play a piano solo and accompany other guests. On one such show, she had a nightclub singer doing her first television stint who was extremely nervous upon seeing all the cameras and microphone booms. During her popular number, the lady changed keys three times, going higher each time because of her nervousness. Billy's sense of pitch kept him with her, even when she finally hit the stratosphere, so they ended together and breathless!

The *Ilka Chase Show* starred the Broadway actress, with Nalle and Durward Kirby as regulars to help with conversation involving guest interviews as well as with guests in musical episodes. On one show, Ilka had a famous dog fancier and breeder from whom she had bought her pet poodle, Mr. Puffle. The guest brought his personal pet, a beautiful female poodle, in which Mr. Puffle took an intense interest. During the final minutes of the show, the female escaped from behind the scenes and bounded onto the set in full view. Like a shot, Mr. Puffle jumped off Ilka Chase's lap and began a most amorous pursuit all through and around the set. Ilka was livid at being more than upstaged, for Mr. Puffle and the poodle visitor had taken the entire show out of her control and in just seconds transformed it into a circus. Conversation was ebbing and total bedlam imminent when Billy had a flash of inspiration, hurried to the grand piano in the living room set and started to improvise in coordination with the leaps, dashes and whatever else of the two dogs. This made the scene appear more as one intended to be a romp, which drew a bear hug from Ilka after the show was off the air. Then, as she released her hug, her face became fearsome and she virtually screamed at her poodle, "MIS--TER

*PUFFLE!*" He came penitently toward her, she grabbed him, took him into the hallway and the sound effects indicated she was blistering his behind for his Ringling Brothers contribution!

As television work slackened, Billy decided it was time to make a transition back into the solo field. However, a dramatic event was to have him enter not the piano field again, but that of the theatre organ.

RCA Victor Records wanted to do a memorial album in honor of Tommy Dorsey and His Orchestra, and do it on the organ in the theatre in which Dorsey and countless other famous entertainers had made their names. This was, of course, the famous Times Square Paramount Theatre in New York. Leonard Bernstein's favorite arranger, Sidney Ramin, was to select the organist and he strongly backed Billy, the two having worked together with Billy playing organ in the Ramin orchestra on some earlier recordings. Billy, who was unknown to RCA officials, had to audition for them on the 4/36 Wurlitzer in the theatre. At that point, he had never played a theatre organ larger than a 3/15. He used George Shearing's rhythm man, Ray Mosca. They just "cut loose," and after two numbers there was cheering in the darkened theatre and the date was set for the recording. RCA arranged for only three nights of rehearsal time for Billy just before the recording date. This terrified him, because he felt that he needed more time to set his music and feeling for such an instrument, especially because at that time no pistons were working on the console. Two weeks before he was scheduled to begin rehearsing, Billy entered the theatre late one night to find a tall, bespectacled and forbidding night watchman. After some conversation, the

watchman finally relented and said Billy could practice. He happened to play his budding arrangement of "Marie," which so impressed the watchman that he exclaimed at its conclusion, "Hey kid, *I like that number!* If you'll play that for me every night you come, I'll let you rehearse late, after all the stage people have left, all the nights until you record. Is it a deal?" Oh, you better believe it was a deal! So, Billy pulled everything together, including himself, and the result was one of the most dramatic theatre organ debuts in the instrument's history. The title of the RCA album was "Swingin' Pipe Organ" and the year was 1958, the beginning of Billy's third career.

Billy Nalle's theatre organ concert debut was to come eight years later in July 1966, on the largest of all Möller theatre organs, the 4/42 instrument in the magnificent Fox Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia. It was the first formal theatre organ concert sponsored by the American Guild of Organists at a national convention. This concert debut created a sensation with reviewers from Atlanta to New York. Billy began playing more and more on various theatre organs in concert situations.

In 1973, he went to Wichita to play the last concert (the first solo one) in that year's series on the newly installed Wurlitzer in the Exhibition Hall of Century II Center. This was the same organ on which he had played in New York at the Paramount Theatre. The combination of delegates to an AGO convention and the public provided an audience of 3000, and Billy's concert was to gain him the invitation to come live in Wichita and be the first artist-in-residence for The Wichita Wurlitzer.

Billy returned to New York, where he remained for the next two years fulfilling commitments both on and off television. Then, in May of 1975, he moved to "Center City, USA," where he was to be the resident musician for the next ten years. During that period, he had many notable accomplishments in concerts, recordings, television, large private gatherings sponsored by commercial films, and a convention of the National Federation of Music Clubs (its first theatre organ concert since its founding at the turn of the century). In May 1978, "The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band" cancelled its concert in Century II Center because only a few hundred tickets had been sold. In the same week, Billy played a Wichita Pops solo concert which drew over 2500 people, a situation which caused some talk on local rock music stations, as well as comment in the newspaper. Billy and The Wichita Wurlitzer created three brilliant recordings that have garnered worldwide praise from reviewers outside the theatre organ world, as well as from those within it. A list of his theatre organ recordings is given in Appendix I.

In retiring from full time musical work this year, Billy will have been "on the boards" for 61 years, worked with an amazing variety of show business people, and done so in every major musical medium. He has managed many "firsts" in music; the more important in the theatre organ field are listed in Appendix II. Though full time work is in Billy's past, we will look forward to the opportunities that will surely present themselves to hear him live

Billy at the New York Paramount 4/36 Wurlitzer, rehearsing for his theatre organ debut recording, late 1957. Photo by Ben Hall, taken for *Time* magazine and RCA for album jacket.





Billy at the Atlanta Fox 4/42 Möller for his theatre organ concert debut before an AGO convention in July 1966. (Lloyd Trimmier photo)

in concert and via new recording projects.

I have gained great insight into the world of music through Billy's work. He has total regard for the MUSIC when he plays. His approach to each piece of music is a new and exciting experience. It is no discredit to any other musician to say that, with such a wide-ranging career, "There's only one Billy Nalle." □

#### APPENDIX I

##### Theatre Pipe Organ Solo Recordings

1. SWINGIN' PIPE ORGAN (RCA Victor): New York Paramount Wurlitzer. Recorded 1957, released 1958.
2. BILLY! (Mirrosonic): Wurlitzer, Richard Weber residence, Schenectady, New York. Recorded 1963, released 1964.
3. THE WIZARD OF ORGAN (Concert Recording): RTOS Rochester Wurlitzer, 1967 concert; DTOC Detroit Wurlitzer, 1967 concert; ALLEN factory theatre organ, 1965 concert. Released 1969.
4. THE ORGAN PLAYS GOLDEN FAVORITES (RCA Victor): Strand Theatre Wurlitzer, Plattsburgh, New York; DTOC Detroit Wurlitzer. Recorded 1968, released 1969 by Reader's Digest. Re-released 1980 as THE MIGHTY PIPE ORGAN PLAYS GOLDEN FAVORITES.
5. Concert Recording album, untitled and not released because CR ended retail recording operation. First recording made on Link theatre organ, Roberson Center for The Arts & Sciences, Binghamton, New York. Recorded 1969. Vestal Press attempting to purchase for release.

6. BIG, BOLD & BILLY (Project 3): Long Island University Wurlitzer, Brooklyn, New York. Recorded 1970, released 1971.
7. BILLY NALLE/SHOW BUSINESS (Telarc): RTOS Rochester Wurlitzer. Recorded 1976, released 1977.
8. THERE IS ONLY ONE BILLY NALLE (WTO): The Wichita Wurlitzer, Wichita, Kansas. Recorded 1977, released 1978.
9. THE ROAD TO WICHITA (WTO): The Wichita Wurlitzer, Wichita, Kansas. Recorded 1980, released 1981.
10. BILLY LIVE AT WICHITA POPS (WTO): The Wichita Wurlitzer, Wichita, Kansas. Recorded 1983, released 1985.

(Other albums involving various instrumental groups ranged from "The Three Suns" in the 1950s, through various orchestras in the 1960s, to the most recent, a theatre organ solo included in a Reader's Digest album of orchestral selections for Christmas released in 1980.)

#### APPENDIX II

##### Some Music Firsts on Theatre Organ by Billy Nalle

1958: First American jazz album recorded on theatre organ ("Swingin' Pipe Organ"), New

After his concert at the Kirk of Dunedin, Florida, in 1970, Billy with his first organ teacher, Eddie Ford (left), and Terry Charles, curator of the Kirk organ. (Joanne Bushey photo)



York Paramount Theatre Wurlitzer.

**1966:** First theatre organ concert for national convention, American Guild of Organists, Möller organ, Fox Theatre, Atlanta, Georgia.

**1967:** First USA television commercial (Shell Oil Co.) using theatre organ, Studio Wurlitzer, Radio City Music Hall Bldg., New York.

**1968:** First public concert on a theatre organ installed in a performing arts center (Link), Roberson Center for The Arts & Sciences, Binghamton, New York.

**1969:** First theatre organ concert in a festival

of arts, Kilgen organ, Palace Theatre, Canton, Ohio.

**1970:** First theatre organ public concert utilizing a professional light show, Wurlitzer, Strand Theatre, Plattsburgh, New York.

**1970:** First theatre organ recording ("Big, Bold & Billy") in quadrisonic sound, Wurlitzer organ, Brooklyn Center of Long Island University, New York.

**1972:** After release of foregoing recording in 1971, it became a best-seller in theatre organ category, which continued through 1975.

**1972:** First theatre organ concert (specially installed Rodgers theatre organ) in a cathedral, Cathedral Church of St. John The Divine, New York.

**1973:** First public all-solo concert on former N.Y. Paramount Theatre Wurlitzer, after its installation as The Wichita Wurlitzer, Century II Center, Wichita, Kansas. Sponsored by Wichita Theatre Organ, Inc. and the Wichita AGO Chapter.

**1975:** First artist-in-residence for The Wichita Wurlitzer, Century II Center.



Billy presenting a theatre organ concert on a specially installed Rodgers in the Cathedral Church of St. John The Divine, New York City, 1972. *(Thom Loughman photo)*



Billy at The Wichita Wurlitzer with percussionist J. C. Combs, Pops ninth season finale, 1981. *(Richard Harris photo)*



In rehearsal with the Peter Nero Trio for their 1979 Wichita Pops concert.

Billy playing a solo concert on The Wichita Wurlitzer, Century II Center, 1980.



The Wichita Wurlitzer Pops Tenth Anniversary show with Nalle at the organ, the WSU Big Band, Steel Band and Marimba Band, and the Isely Singers in "Center City Rag," 1982.

Billy at the Seattle Paramount Wurlitzer after his concert for the 1981 ATOS Convention in Seattle. *(John Sharp photo)*





Photographer Dan Lovett caught Billy in the Green Room at the Oakland Paramount after his POPS concert, March 1986.

**1976:** First television color documentary about theatre organ in the USA, utilizing the Wichita Wurlitzer, made by PBS-TV station KPTS, Wichita, for national PBS syndication.

**1976:** First combination concert and public dance in the USA, music entirely on theatre organ, The Wichita Wurlitzer, Century II Center.

**1979:** First television program in the USA for which all music supplied by a theatre organ, "The Pipes of Christmas," on The Wichita Wurlitzer by PBS-TV station KPTS for national PBS syndication.

**1979:** First public concert by Peter Nero & Trio with a theatre organ, The Wichita Wurlitzer, Wichita Pops concert, Century II Center.

**1980:** First theatre organ presentation sponsored by a manufacturer in the USA for all its national and international representatives, The Wichita Wurlitzer, Century II Center, 2978 people present.

**1981:** First concert in the USA of "Big Band" jazz played on a theatre organ, assisted by J. C. Combs, percussionist formerly with Stan Kenton Orchestra, The Wichita Wurlitzer, Wichita Pops concert, Century II Center.

**1982:** First theatre variety show in the USA utilizing a theatre organ playing in combination with a xylophone combo, a steel band combo and a jazz orchestra, plus a combination choral/dancing group, Tenth Anniversary of Wichita Pops series, The Wichita Wurlitzer, Century II Center.

**1983:** Half-century tradition of all-classical music broadcast by *The New York Times'* radio station WQXR, New York, broken when selections of Billy Nalle WTO albums broadcast on *Around The Town* program, MC (and station's senior announcer) Duncan Pirnie.

**1984:** First theatre organ music used for logo music in station identification announcements by WQXR, New York. Music was in jazz and popular styles; all other logo music being in classical music styles.

**1985:** First theatre organ concert sponsored by the National Federation of Music Clubs since its founding in 1898, for its national convention in Century II Center. □

# ATOS Committee Reports

## NOMINATING COMMITTEE Final Report 1986

The 1986 Nominating Committee was composed of Vice President Russell Joseph, Chairman; Rudolph Frey of San Bruno, California; Margaret Ann Foy of Denver, Colorado; and Richard Neidich of Washington, D.C., providing representation from the West, Midwest and East. We were fortunate in once again having Margaret Ann Foy serve as Teller.

The balloting process adopted for the first time in 1985 proved again this year its economy and efficiency. The total cost was \$871.51, a slight increase because of increase in membership. Not only were more ballots mailed, 5373 vs. 4912, but more were returned, 1162 vs. 743. This response was due in no small part to the insertion of small "reminders" throughout the entire March/April issue of THEATRE ORGAN, as recommended by last year's Committee.

At the same time, we should not take comfort in this small success; 1100 returns from a membership of over 5000 means that there is work to be done. We must generate an awareness on the part of our members of the importance of exercising their privilege of participation in the administration of our growing organization. Any suggestions along these lines will be welcomed and appreciated. A statistical report of the election follows:

### ELECTION EXPENSES:

5400 Ballot envelopes .....	\$257.58
UPS shipping charges .....	12.88
200 Resume sheets for overseas mailing .....	75.00
Tax .....	16.63
Foreign postage .....	84.92
Typesetting .....	25.00
Photoengraving .....	65.00
Artwork .....	90.00
Prorated cost of two additional pages in Journal for candidate resumes .....	157.50
Insertion of ballots in Journal .....	87.00
<b>TOTAL COST .....</b>	<b>\$871.51</b>

### BALLOTS PROCESSED:

Ballots in Journal for US and Canada .....	5180
Ballots mailed overseas .....	193

<b>TOTAL BALLOTS DISTRIBUTED .....</b>	<b>5373</b>
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Ballots returned from US and Canada .....	1103
Overseas ballots returned .....	59

<b>TOTAL BALLOTS RETURNED .....</b>	<b>1162</b>
Ballots disqualified (voted for more than 3) .....	7
<b>TOTAL BALLOTS COUNTED .....</b>	<b>1155</b>

### VOTING RESULTS:

1. Allen R. Miller .....	569
2. John Ledwon .....	548
3. Catherine Koenig .....	398
4. Alden Stockebrand .....	329
5. Ray Danford .....	324
6. Miles Rudisill .....	292
7. Dr. Edward J. Mullins .....	262
8. Robert D. Markworth .....	260
9. Irving C. Light .....	249
10. Robert J. Heinzen .....	150

### WRITE-INS:

1. Don Baker .....	2
2. Ralph Beaudry .....	1
3. Leon Berry .....	1
4. Shirley Flowers .....	1
5. Rudy Frey .....	1
6. George R. Johnson .....	1
7. Lance Johnson .....	1
8. Dick Kline .....	1
9. Lloyd Klos .....	1
10. Lyn Larsen .....	1
11. Madeline LiVolsi .....	2
12. John Muri .....	1
13. Jonas Nordwall .....	1
14. John Peters .....	2
15. Lee Smith .....	1
16. Tom Stehle .....	2
17. Walt Strony .....	2
18. Trousdale .....	1
19. Paul Van Der Molen .....	1
20. James West .....	1

Respectfully Submitted,  
**Russell Joseph**  
Chairman, Nominating Committee □

## Moving?

Send your  
change  
of address  
to ...



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