



Stars Fell On *the* Alabama

by Gary W. Jones

On December 25, 1927, the City of Birmingham was blessed with a house. Not just an ordinary house, but a palace. Designed after the great European palaces of years past, it was a palace where dreams and fantasies came true. Birmingham was indeed blessed with the Alabama Theatre whose career has lasted and outshone all others.

Designed by Graven & Mayger, the Alabama was built by the Publix/Paramount chain as their flagship in the Southeast and opened its doors as the largest movie palace in Birmingham. No other theatre could rival its Spanish/Moorish design. Many copied the spectacular public displays and shows, but all have been lost or displaced by progress. Birmingham was fortunate to have more than 12 movie palaces, movie houses and vaudeville stages. Each went through a series of owners and the Alabama was not spared this fate. Sold in 1935 by Publix/Paramount to the Wilby-Kincey group, the house survived the first wave of demise and remained Birmingham's premier house. Showing only first-runs and the finest live entertainment, the house remained active while others diminished. The Wilby-Kincey group, however, was

not without problems and eventually sold the house to the ABC-Southeastern chain of theatres. Here began the Alabama's decline. Through a series of sales and owners, the Alabama lost its foothold in the downtown area. ABC-Southeastern sold the theatre to the Plitt chain, Plitt sold to the local Cobb chain, and Cobb (abandoning downtown completely) sold the theatre to Costa-Head, a local development group. Unsettled by a rapidly declining downtown area and a large population that was becoming both urbanized and plagued with racial tension, the Alabama, along with the remaining downtown community, could only look on helplessly as a steady exodus of once faithful patrons gradually moved out, refusing to even visit downtown. Citizens stood idly by and watched house after house go through the "B" movie/Kung Fu stages and then finally be torn down. Fortunately the Alabama was spared this fate and went through only a mild series of second-run films before being closed and sold to Costa-Head.

The Alabama chapter of the American Theatre Organ Society sprang from the Southeastern chapter which began maintaining the Alabama Theatre's Wurlitzer

in 1969. Chapter members found the organ in barely playable condition and began a restoration and maintenance process which continues today. The theatre's 4/20 Publix #1 is considered one of the nation's top organs and one of the few organs remaining in its original site. Shipped on November 11, 1927, Opus 1783 was installed by the Wurlitzer company as their largest in the Southeast. Its heavily ornate, red, gold and black console complements the house's design and, speaking from three separate chambers, fills the auditorium with a glorious sound. In 1985 the chapter purchased a Trivo Post Horn and added the twenty-first rank to the organ. During the period when the theatre was closed, the chapter produced two public organ concerts per year and held chapter meetings on a monthly basis. The Alabama chapter constantly maintained the organ and for years provided the only maintenance on the building in exchange for use of both the theatre and organ. By seeing donations of materials and labor, the chapter kept the building secure, in good repair, and lighted (there are over 21,000 light bulbs in the theatre!). But alas, the story again grows dim.



At Left: The Alabama Theatre - 18th Street and 3rd Avenue North. The marquee shows *Wings* with Clara Bow and Buddy Rogers as currently playing. (Birmingham News Staff Photo)

Interior of the Alabama.

(Photo - R. Yuill)

Costa-Head, once-prominent developers, had purchased the theatre to be used as an anchor for their downtown revitalization projects. Their plan included office space, retail shops, a mall, condominiums, the theatre, and landscaping for several key blocks including (and surrounding) Block 87, where the Alabama stands. The plan was excellent. However, its execution was plagued by large problems — each seemed to stand in line waiting its turn. As complications with the downtown project mounted, costs and budgets were cut. News came directly from the Costa-Head offices to the chapter: We could no longer have access to the building. Costa-Head could no longer afford the lighting, heating, water bills, liability insurance, and any other expenditures to keep the building open. They would have to shut down the theatre until their current problems were resolved. This would mean turning off power which would eliminate the sump-pumps and allow the basement to flood (read: organ relay and blower!!) as well as potentially causing massive damage to the building as a result of plaster falling because of lack of environmental controls. The Alabama chapter quickly put together a proposal to Costa-Head suggesting the chapter run the house in hopes of offsetting these costs and thus keeping the theatre open. By showing a Classic Film Series and opening the house for

live performances, the chapter felt it could at least have the building pay its own way and forego its closing. Costa-Head agreed, and the chapter began operating the house. Months later, Costa-Head announced their plans to file for bankruptcy. The initial news was devastating, only to be topped by the startling news that they had not made a mortgage payment for three months, and that the

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mortgage holder was ready to foreclose. Anxious to get their funds and sell the property, the mortgage holder pressed to gain control of the theatre. Realizing that the property on which the theatre sits is of greater value than the mortgage, they planned to tear the building down and sell the quarter block to the highest bidder.

Our choices were few. The chapter's board devised a plan for raising money

to pay the arrearages and to transfer title to a newly-formed, non-profit organization controlled by the Alabama chapter. The membership approved the plan unanimously and everyone set out to work. We first approached the Federal Bankruptcy Court to ask for permission and advice in pursuing this endeavor. The Court enthusiastically supported saving the theatre and granted an extension on the foreclosure, giving us much-needed time to mount a public drive for funds. Our next concern was media coverage. With the Costa-Head bankruptcy proceedings being reported daily, we had little trouble in obtaining local media attention in reporting on the fate of the Alabama Theatre. Public outcry was immense. Most people finally realized that places like this were not being built anymore and many historically significant structures had already been destroyed, including all of the other movie palaces, the historic Tutwiler Hotel, and the grand and architecturally breathtaking “Temple of Travel,” The Terminal Station.

Each and every chapter member participated in the drive for funds. More than \$130,000 had to be raised in only 60 days. Chapter members enlisted the aid of their friends, and a “Save The Alabama” campaign was begun. With each chapter member contributing his or

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The Alabama *(continued)*



Chapter members usher all shows at The Alabama Theatre. It takes approximately 20 people per show just to usher the house properly. (Photo - Gary W. Jones)

her time and effort, the money started trickling in, slowly at first then building toward the deadline. We all did any and everything to raise the money. The piano students of one chapter member baked cookies and sold them door-to-door, raising \$53.00 in one week. A vaudeville/variety benefit show was put on by chapter members and local professional groups with admission set at whatever one could give at the door. A special account was established at Colonial Bank to accept donations, with the promise that if we did not succeed in our efforts, the bank would refund all contributions. During this time, key chapter members began an organized campaign to contact local businesses, social clubs and establishments, enlisting their support to supplement continuing individual donations. Joining the chapter in its efforts was the Birmingham Downtown Action Committee. Next came *The Birmingham News* and The National Bank of Commerce.



Alabama Chapter President Cecil Whitmire after transferring title and closing the deal:

"WE DID IT!"

(Photo - Birmingham News Staff Photo)

Ideas were gathered and the "Save The Alabama" campaign gained momentum. Stories about, and forms for sending in, contributions were printed daily in *The Birmingham News*. The Downtown Action Committee accepted contributions on the chapter's behalf and the National Bank of Commerce set up a special account which posted interest daily to contributions. Also, the names of persons and corporations making contributions were printed daily, including the amount of their contributions. Everyone loves to see his name in print, and with amounts listed beside the names, the amounts began to increase. One and five-dollar contributions became twenty-five and fifty-dollar contributions. As a premium, any contribution of \$25.00 or more entitled the contributor to a T-shirt which showed the theatre's vertical sign and the caption: "I Helped Save The Alabama Theatre." The response was tremendous, and three days before the court date for foreclosure the chapter had the necessary funds to pay the arrearages and transfer the title. A new, non-profit corporation was set up to own and operate the theatre. Birmingham Landmarks, Inc. now operates the house with its board of directors governed by the Alabama chapter's board. The house is staffed completely by Alabama chapter members. Young and old, each participates in a day-to-day operation of the house. Everyone has a job and a responsibility and contributes as a member of the team. Board members leave meetings to head to the lobby to sweep. Executive directors can be found changing light-bulbs, toilet paper rolls in restrooms, and the marquee letters out front. Family members join together to help operate the concession stand, take tickets, or usher patrons. Everyone participates and no one shirks any job or duty.

The house is currently running a bi-weekly Classic Film Series. On alternate weekends, return engagement (or second run) films are shown. As first-run films leave the theatres, the Alabama "picks them up" and runs them at reduced prices. The Alabama Symphony has contracted for several performances, the Birmingham Children's Theatre will be staging most of their season performances at the Alabama, the State of Alabama Ballet regularly uses the house, and, most recently, the Birmingham Opera Theatre has agreed to collaborate with the Alabama chapter to co-produce "Christmas At the Alabama" in December 1987. The theatre is booked solid for the month of October with plays, live jazz concerts, silent films, and organ concerts.

Even though the entire project of saving the Alabama Theatre was a group endeavor, without the efforts of Chapter President Cecil Whitmire and his wife Linda, the project could have faltered. The Whitmires spearheaded the group's efforts and acted as coordinators for



(Photo - Gary W. Jones)

everyone's duties. It was under their leadership and guidance as "team captains" that the Alabama chapter was so successful in its endeavor.

Our battle has just begun. Our work is cut out for us. With a \$650,00 mortgage to retire we have just started a long, uphill climb. The chapter is dedicated to the task at hand — there is no turning back. We are committed to serving the public with the finest in family entertainment. With teamwork and a common goal in sight, we are dedicated to preserving and maintaining the Alabama Theatre and its organ in the grand tradition of the movie palace.



Richard Parker and Bob Johnson complete re-wiring of the main chandelier in the grand lobby of The Alabama Theatre. Each broken piece of glass was exactly duplicated and every wire was replaced.

(Photo - Birmingham News Staff Photo)