

PROFILE NO. 4

EDDY HANSON

by M. H. Doner

Like many another profession, that of the organist is often filled with exciting and memorable moments — along with the routine of many hours of simply playing music. Eddy has been at it a long time, and still enjoys every minute of it.

SHOULD YOU, by chance, have visited one of Chicago-land's swanky night clubs to dine and enjoy an evening of delightful organ melodies from a Hammond console you would soon know you were listening to one who knows his way around on an organ. You might not have appreciated the fact that those talented fingers and feet belong to a man who has two "firsts" to his credit, the first organist in the area to be the featured organist in three of the city's De Luxe movie palaces during the lush era of the stage productions and stage shows some thirty years ago and was the first radio organist in Chicago, one of the very first in the nation.

During the years the writer has always made it a point to look up this organist, the first time almost ten years ago during his broadcast from radio station WCFL. Always a charming personality, he was pleased to talk about those tremendous years when the great organs in the movie houses were thrilling their patrons with the organ music of Jesse Crawford, Helen Anderson, Milton Charles, Eddie Fitch, Earl Abel and others. His name is equally well known to millions of organ lovers throughout the Chicago area. So, let's take an inside look at one of Chicago's pioneer theatre and radio organists, and relive the career of Eddy Hanson.

Inherits Love of Music

Born in New London, Wisconsin, on August 1st, 1898, to a family of musicians, (his mother was a pianist, his father a trumpet and violin player). Young Eddy loved nothing more than to listen to his mother at the piano or, perhaps, to trot over to a neighbor's house to listen to those "Edison" cylinders on the "Talking Machine," then to rush home and "play piano" by the hour on turned over bread tins and pie plates. There were times, he admits, when his mother could tolerate the "playing" no longer and confined him to the closet to deaden the sound! Once at the piano, the lad progressed rapidly and by the time he was eight he was on the way to becoming a pianist and composer; in fact, only two years later he played in a local dance band in Waupaca, Wisconsin, his feet scarcely able to reach the pedals. His first composition, Golden Glow, inspired and named after the flowers in his mother's garden, was published by the F. J. A. Foster music firm in Chicago when Eddy was only 12 years old. With the passing of his mother the following year, Eddy decided to make music his livelihood and career. But where? Waupaca? Too small a town, no chances to get ahead there. How about Neenah, only forty miles

away which, he had heard, boasted the world's largest woodenware factory, plus factories and paper mills and "many rich people." Off he went, and, after attending school during the day, set out for the Doty Theatre, a dime movie house, where he accompanied films at the piano.

Meets Carrie Jacobs-Bond

Then, one night, it happened—an event that Eddy has never forgotten. Let's let Eddy tell it in his own words, as lifted from an article titled "America's Gallant Lady of Song" which was published in Wisconsin's quarterly literary publication "Creative Wisconsin" only last year.

"One night in the fall of 1916 the manager came down to the piano and told me we had a very famous lady in the audience. It was Carrie Jacobs-Bond. She had come to Wisconsin from California with her close friends, Mr. and Mrs. Hawks. Mrs. Hawks was a former Neenah girl and had been summoned back home by the serious illness of her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Howard. Mr. Howard was a wealthy paper manufacturer, and also the grandfather of two small boys, Howard and Kenneth Hawks, who were later to become famous movie producers and directors. I was very nervous at first to know Mrs. Bond was in the house, and yet I took it as an answer to my prayers that some day I would meet her. It turned out to be a dream of youth come true. Quickly controlling my nervousness, I wondered what I should play. I had been playing in the dark, as was my usual custom, improvising a musical accompaniment to the silent movie of that era, fitting my music to the action on the screen.

"Suddenly I decided to disregard the picture and play an all Carrie Jacobs-Bond recital, playing nothing but her compositions. This was easy for me. Like some people collect old stamps, old furniture, and bottles, I had been collecting Carrie Jacobs-Bond songs for years. I had collected everything she ever wrote. I felt inspired and played for two hours, never repeating any of her songs, nor did I turn on the light. I knew all of Mrs. Bond's songs from memory. She told me later that I had played several of her very first songs which even she had forgotten. At this time she was at the full flush of her fame, at the very zenith of her popularity and financial success. *I Love You Truly* had made her very rich and *A Perfect Day* which she published in 1910 was selling five million copies of sheet music by 1916, and there were 63 different recordings and arrangements of it. Altogether it sold seven million copies (sheet music) before its popularity waned.



After the show Mrs. Bond sent for me. I went out front and as I approached I saw her standing at the curb with a lady and a gentleman whom she introduced as Mr. and Mrs. Howard Hawks from California. They were about to enter their limousine. When she saw me, Mrs. Bond came over with outstretched arms, and greeted me warmly. She was very extravagant in praise of my 'recital in the dark' and was amazed that I could play all of her songs for a two hour period, sans light. She was also very surprised that I included her very latest number which had only been on the market a couple of months. It was a rather showy concert piece, a waltz which she called *The Waltz of the Wild Flowers*. It was written in the keys of D Flat, and G Flat (5 and 6 flats) which is considered quite difficult for the average pianist. I would place it in about Grade 8 or 9. It required a facility of technique in performance, and as I recall, it had some 'mean' octave passages. But I was in good practice, and it was as easy as falling off a log at my age. I lived at the piano, and used to sit at the instrument as soon as I got up in the morning, forgetting to have my breakfast first. I even forgot to dress, and played in my night gown. I guess I was what you would call a bit 'touched' on the subject of piano." (The rest of the story is fascinating reading but we strongly suspect that our readers are more interested in how Eddy Hanson switched to the organ.)

Switches to Organ

Dan Barton, of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, wanted a demonstrator to play his "Bartola." Eddy got the job. When Mr. Barton produced his first pipe organs, Eddy was the chap who demonstrated the musical possibilities of the instrument. That experience proved once and for all that the organ was for him and, after a stint in the war, he studied

organ under Mason Slade at Lawrence College, Appleton, Wisconsin, and went to Chicago to study under Frank Van Duesen and Clarence Eddy at the American Conservatory and Chicago Musical College, respectively. In 1924, at the age of 26, Eddy Hanson was staff organist at radio station WGN, the organ studio at that time located in the Drake Hotel. In June of that year he broadcast a full hour program, including a Carrie Jacobs-Bond group of songs. The reputation of Eddy Hanson as an organist was made and it now remained for appointment to the lush movie palaces.

Three Star Billing

Jesse Crawford came from California when Balaban and Katz opened the Tivoli in 1921. At this time Eddy was working for the Ascher Brothers who were the big theatre men at that time, owning a chain of more than 20 houses, including the Metropolitan Theatre at 47th and Grand Boulevard (now South Parkway) and the Oakland Square at Oakwood and Drexel. Eddie Fitch was organist at the Metropolitan, Eddy at the Oakland Square. Both were playing a two-manual Kimball. During his association with Ascher Brothers, Eddy had worked with Helen Anderson who later became Mrs. Jesse Crawford. After Balaban and Katz built the Chicago Theatre, the Ascher Brothers built the Roosevelt Theatre across the street. Eddie Fitch and Helen Anderson were sent there as solo organists.

In 1926, the Crawfords left to open the Paramount on Times Square, New York, and Balaban and Katz engaged Eddy with the plan to put him at the new Oriental Theatre. One night, after midnight, a photographer was on hand to get a shot of Eddy at the console (see photo). Then, at the last minute, B & K, decided to use Eddy on

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rotation between the Uptown and Tivoli. Milton Charles was organist at the Tivoli at this time and Balaban and Katz, planned to rotate Charles and Hanson between the two houses with a unit show, with occasional weeks at the Chicago Theatre. In those days, comments Eddy, the Chicago, Tivoli and Uptown were the "epitome of prestige and attainment" for a feature organist.

Eddy Hanson, a great admirer and a disciple of Jesse Crawford, was elated to follow him on rotation between the three houses. Crawford was a big name in Chicago and it meant considerable prestige to Eddy to follow in his wake. In his letters to the writer, Eddy makes known the fact that he considers Jesse Crawford, a "perfectionist" who worked hard and earned every speck of success he has enjoyed — a "solid craftsman." He contends that Jesse did a lot to bring the pipe organ into the consciousness of the general public, and, at the same time, raised the prestige and the professional dignity of the old time theatre organists to a new height.

"The Oriental Theatre," writes Eddy, "was more garish and had a less impressive clientele. To play organ there didn't mean much. They had community singing exclusively for 'organ solos' and anyone could play for the slides as they were flashed on the screen, because that audience would sing for anyone. There was a saying in those days that anyone can play at the Oriental but few can get by at the Chicago, Tivoli, or Uptown." Every third week, from 1927 to 1932, Eddy would hit one of them, and kept going "around and around." Milton Charles soon left B and K and Eddy carried on alone. It is interesting to note that while Eddy was playing one house, the other two did not have a solo organist during the three week interval for over a year. Eventually Balaban and Katz placed Hanson opposite Eddie House, and Eddy recalls that they were always getting their respective mail, phone calls, and instructions mixed up at the main office.

Worked With Top Artists

While at the Chicago, Tivoli and Uptown Theatres, Eddy worked with the top artists of the time, Fred Waring's Pennsylvanians, Paul Whiteman, Amos and Andy (Eddy played their theme song at first), George Jessel, Rudy Vallee, Frankie Masters, Ted Lewis, Paul Ash, Sophie Tucker, Mae Murray, Burns and Allen, Joe Penner, Ruth Etting, Mark Fisher, Ginger Rogers, The Duncan Sisters and the Marx Brothers, etc. Eddy likes to reminisce "It all seems like those were the best days, when viewed in nostalgia . . . but they were not. I had to do a solo one week from memory, all the while I was memorizing and learning the one for the next week. It was a nerve-wracking thing to have to go through this all the time from week to week and when I went up on the elevator and looked into the faces of 2500 to 3000 faces at the Tivoli or 5000 at the Uptown and Chicago, it made a few butterflies in my stomach, and brassy as I was then, as kids are, it seemed they all sat on their hands with the attitude that seemed to holler at me 'Now go ahead and do your stuff and try to make us like it'."

After the decline of the theatre organ in the early 30's Eddy Hanson went back into radio broadcasting. He had started on WDAP in 1924, going eventually to WLS, WBBM, WCFL-NBC, and affiliates.

While at WLS in 1924, he had composed the music and lyrics of one of the first big radio song hits *At the*

End of the Sunset Trail which was the theme song of Grace Wilson and later Vella Cook, two of the early prima donne of the air in those days. The song was later recorded on the WLS Barton by Ralph Waldo Emerson. There is a bit of interesting history here. *Sunset Trail* was composed four years before Eddy met Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson saw the manuscript of the song on the organ and liked it so well that he called in a music publisher and placed the song with him. When Eddy learned of this, he permitted Emerson's name to be used as the lyricist but Emerson, preferring the phrase "words and music by," thereupon claimed authorship for it in its entirety on all his personal appearances and radio broadcasts, not once mentioning Hanson's name.

Other compositions included *Rattlesnake Rag* which was recorded for Capitol label by Joe "Fingers" Carr; *Why Did you Break my Heart* by the late Ken Griffin for Columbia; *Polish Piano Polka* and *Wisconsin Waltz* by Lawrence Duchow, the *Wisconsin Polka King*, for RCA Victor, *Only One Love, Just Like the Dawn, California Moon, Only a Weaver of Dreams, Wisconsin Wonderland, Springtime in the Dells, The Joy and Pain of Love* and others.

Eddy Hanson is a versatile musician, playing the harp, accordion, piano. He was solo saxophonist with John Phillip Sousa at the age of 18 and toured with him and Clarence Darrow, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks, and also worked with Gene Autry before the latter became internationally famous.

In 1952, at the age of 54, Eddy nearly lost his life in a head-on auto collision. The driver he was with fell asleep at the wheel of a brand new car, got in the wrong lane and smacked head on into a 1948 jalopy. Result: a triple fracture of the pelvis, dislocated right hip, a spinal injury and a badly injured sciatic nerve — three years in and out of the hospital. "It is a miracle," he wrote, "that my hands, arms and fingers were undamaged and in time I will be 100 per cent. I am healthy, feel good, and am not going to let it get me down. When I see my rich contemporaries with long faces, not being able to eat what they desire, I am a fortunate guy — I can eat a door knob and digest it, do everything I did at 21 only better. My youngest son is going on 8, so you see I really do not have much to complain about."

This is the spirit that has maintained Eddy Hanson through the years. This has been the story of one of the pioneers in the organ world. Eddy has had his fortunes and misfortunes and his letters tell of some of the trials of a musician in the face of obstacles thrown in his path by unions, tricky employers, and what not. But Eddy has not reached the end of the road or entered other lines of activity for a livelihood. As a boy his ambition was to make music his career. Thus it will continue.

For some time now, Eddy has been writing his memories in a book tentatively titled "Da Capo" for publication at a future date. This will be a veritable storehouse of information on organ history in the Chicago area, a must for those interested in glorious history.

As this is written Eddy is playing a Hammond Percussion organ in the dining room of the swank Hotel Parmly in Painesville, Ohio, and he is also on the local radio station and teaches organ and piano on the side. His theme song on the air is still the same *If A Wish Could Make It So*. Eddy has worked hard, and dreamed hard all his life, and he is happy and pleased with life today. He still love his native state of Wisconsin and maintains a home in Waupaca, to which he hopes to retire eventually when he tires of playing the organ.