

SIG ROSS: The Lifelong Itinerary of an Organist

by Charles Baas and Frank Doka



In 1936 Sig subbed for organist Merle Clarke at the Michigan Theatre, Detroit.
(Photo from Sigmond Ross's collection)

In 1918 an aspiring young lad of sixteen, with a keen interest in theatre pipe organs and six years of piano lessons, landed a job — ushering patrons of the Palace Theatre in Buffalo, New York, to their seats. It wasn't long, however, until the young Sigmond Ross was ushered to his seat — at the console of the Palace Theatre organ. The tale of this man's career reads like a *Cook's Tour Guide* of the theatre organ world.

The Palace staff organist knew of Sig's piano training and interest in organs, and he needed a relief organist to fill-in during his breaks. This was grist to Sig's mill. He eagerly absorbed the necessary rudimentary lessons, and off he went! From then on, whenever Sig wasn't ushering or subbing, he was sitting beside the organist, listening, watching, and asking questions. He practiced diligently at night after the theatre closed, and also found an excellent organ teacher in Mr. George Bouchard, organist and orchestra leader at the Strand Theatre in Buffalo. Sigmond's own intuition propelled him into an organ career!

Before long, young Sig was hired by the Keiths Theatre in Buffalo. His talent for improvising melodies to fit the moods and actions of the pictures, his sight-reading skill, his practicing, were all beginning to pay dividends. This job was soon followed by engagements at other Buffalo theatres: the Broadway, Allen, Seneca, Williams Street and, again, the Palace.

In 1920 Ross left Buffalo to play in an Oswego, New York, theatre. After a brief interlude there, he became organist at the Crescent Theatre in Syracuse, New York. Here he accompanied his first spectacular

film, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, starring Rudolph Valentino. Of course, many others followed. Unfortunately, the Crescent closed ten months after Sig became its organist. However, within three weeks he was engaged by the leading theatre in Syracuse, the Strand, which also had a 20-member orchestra. This engagement lasted seven months. During the time he lived in Syracuse, Sig studied piano, organ and music theory at the Krouse College of Music, Syracuse University, and continued his dogged pursuit of perfection in music while living in Albany.

Sig Ross seemed beset with an insatiable drive to keep on the move. After three months as organist at the new Keiths Theatre in Buffalo, he migrated to Detroit where he added five new theatres to his itinerary: the Family, Garrick, Adams, Linwood-LaSalle and the Gladwin Park.

In 1926, after his success in Detroit, Sig yielded to the urge to try his fortune in Chicago. For this city, he needed and obtained a transfer from the union, but with the restriction that, for the first six months, he could only accept substitute jobs. This limitation displeased him, and after a few such engagements, he contacted the manager of the Rialto Theatre in Racine, Wisconsin. An audition resulted in his prompt hiring. The Rialto also had an orchestra and featured Vaudeville. After six months there, Sig traveled to Des Moines, Iowa, where he played for five months at the Paramount Theatre. Next came five months in Waterloo, Iowa, and then he returned to Detroit to play out the era of the silent movies in the Palms-State, Colonial, Linwood-LaSalle and Avalon theatres.

The 1929 crash and subsequent depression, plus the arrival of talking pictures, forced the picture-organists to scramble for new homes. Sig had to adjust his life to a career without movies. His piano-playing ability led to piano or organ engagements in restaurants, saloons, hotels and skating rinks, etc. Between 1929 and 1936 his itinerary records a temporary job at the Senate Theatre pipe organ, a spot with Detroit radio station WJBK playing light classics on the piano, and teaching piano and Hammond organ. In 1934-1936, Sig played at the Oriole and Ramona theatres in Detroit. When staff organist Merle Clarke went to Dallas, Texas, for six months to play for the 1936 Centennial, Sig was his substitute at the prestigious Michigan Theatre.

In the fall of 1937, Sig became the organist for the Eastwood Park Roller Rink. This lasted until 1945. In 1948 and 1949, after a six-month stint at the Pelican Club in Denver, Colorado, Ross had the ultimate satisfaction of being solo organist at the finest theatre in uptown Detroit, the Fisher, which had a 4/34 Wurlitzer. Then follows a record of engagements at the Town Casino in Buffalo and Emery's in Port Huron, Michigan, as well as a nationwide tour (Detroit to Oregon and back) as organist with a commercial show that covered 18 cities and 18 states. Also recorded are three months at the new Miracle Mile Ice Rink in Detroit and five years at the piano at little Caesar's Pizza Parlors. Audiences and patrons have heard and applauded Sig's music in a multitude of Michigan cities.

Sig again played the Fisher Theatre Wurlitzer in 1963 after the Detroit Theatre Organ Club had moved it to the Iris



A Ross guest appearance at Grosse Pointe's Punch & Judy Theatre.

(Photo from Sigmund Ross's collection)

and again after it was moved to the Senate, the current home of the DTOC. Sig's last booking-record entry is that of organist in the then new Americana Theatre in Southfield, Michigan, in 1969. He was 67.

Retire? Not on your life! Sig was a musician for life. Through the seventies and early eighties, he participated in organ workshops presented by Motor City Chapter under the supervision of Gil Francis. He also played some Motor City Fourth Sunday programs at the Royal Oak Theatre (These are free programs offered to the public to acquaint them with the charm of theatre pipe organ music.)

In the Macomb Theatre in Mt. Clemens, Michigan, Sig had a chance to demonstrate his past forte, accompaniment of silent films, when he played the Rudolph Valentino film, *Son of the Sheik*. Opportunities like this put him back in touch with his substantial following in Michigan. Many a fan recognized Sigmund Ross from his supper club and roller rink days. Alas, such events became too few and far between.

Sig was rebuilding a circle of friends, centered around the Grande Barton in the Royal Oak Theatre, when his health failed and, on June 12, 1987, his 74 years of music came to an end. His friends at the Royal Oak will continue to meet there, but they will listen in vain for the "Ross sound" which betrayed his long career at the console and his mastery of registration. "Wedding of the Winds" or "Kamenoi Ostrov" will never sound quite the same as when we heard it Monday nights at the Royal Oak.

Opening of Nominations for 1988 Election of Directors

**NOTE:
DEADLINE IS
FEBRUARY 1, 1988**

It is time to nominate candidates for the National ATOS Board of Directors for the three-year term from July 1988 through June 1991. All regular ATOS members are eligible for nomination and may nominate themselves or be nominated by other members, in which case written consent of the nominee is mandatory and must be received before the nominee's name can be placed on the ballot.

A nominee need have no special talent or experience in pipe organ technology or musicianship; however, nominees should have a demonstrated interest in ATOS and the time to work toward the goals and the growth of the society. While there are certain benefits enjoyed by directors, one of which is the reimbursement of certain meeting-related expenses, there are also responsibilities. Along with a willingness to participate in the administrative affairs of the society, it is most important that Board members faithfully attend both Board and Committee meetings.

The Board usually meets only once a year during Convention, so attendance of all Directors is necessary if the decisions and actions of the Board are to be truly responsive to the membership. In addition, Directors serve on one or more committees providing valuable input to the Board. The chairmen of these committees are responsible for submitting a written report of their activities and recommendations prior to the annual meeting of the Board.

Procedure to be observed in the nomination process is as follows:

1. Each nominee shall furnish a small black and white photo, together with a statement, **not to exceed 100 words**, including personal data, work and theatre organ experience, and a short platform statement.
2. All candidates must have their resumes and photos mailed to the ATOS Secretary, 423 North Stafford Avenue, Richmond, Virginia 23220, **no later than February 1, 1988.**
3. Your ballot and the resumes of candidates will be included in the March/April THEATRE ORGAN. By voting for the candidates of your choice, you are demonstrating your interest in and support of ATOS objectives.

If you have any questions, write or call Allen Miller, Chairman, Nominating Committee, 167 Carriage Drive, Glastonbury, Connecticut 06033, or phone 203/633-5710.