



Photos by Gary Shipe

# The Buffalo Shuffle

By Geoffrey Paterson

It had been 23 years since so many theatre organ fans last gathered in Western New York for a weekend of looking, listening and schmoozing. The 1964 National Convention was one of the first held by the growing ATOE, and it is still talked about today. But where 1964 is remembered for one astonishing concert (Pearl White at Shea's), the 1987 Regional, given the inspired title, "Shuffle Off to Buffalo," will likely be recalled for one heavenly Wurlitzer (Shea's) and a few — too few — spellbinding concert moments.

"What a sound!"

"It's what everybody *thinks* their organ sounds like."

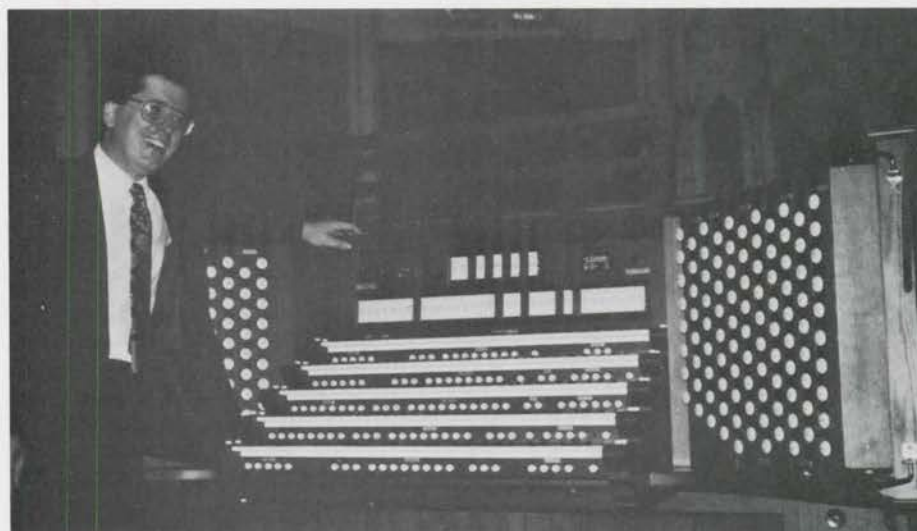
"Never heard anything like it in my life!"

"It's the Fox, the Chicago, and the Paramount all in one organ!"

Those were just some of the comments from awestruck conventioners hearing the rebuilt Shea's Buffalo 4/28 Wurlitzer for the first time. The coalescence of organ and room is synergy at its sonic best. Indeed, one observer noted of this quintessential combination: "It's not perfect, but it'll do until something perfect comes along." What seemed to charm people most was the fact that renovation has not destroyed the patina of age and the warmth it gives the theatre — something that those restored to opening-night sparkle seem to lose in the process.



Ron Rhode, Auditorium Theatre 4/22 Wurlitzer, Rochester, NY.



Walt Strony, at the console of the 5/140 Moller organ, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Buffalo, NY.



Robert Wolfe performing at the Riviera Theatre 3/20 Wurlitzer, North Tonawanda, NY.



Home base for the 451 registrants was the downtown Hilton. For a hotel that allegedly caters to conventions, meal service was woefully inadequate. But the beds were big and the ice, though far away, was cold. Many dollars worth of shuttle busses built for ten-year-olds could have been saved if the Hyatt, two blocks from Shea's had been available when the committee got around to calling. The Hilton was just a bit too far away for walking.

Preceded by a tasty wings, weck and champagne reception in the lobby, the opening concert at Shea's featured veteran Lyn Larsen. His scintillating program was no less than the tasteful musical mix we have come to expect from him. It was, alas, no more than that, either, and proved to be the biggest disappointment of the weekend. Uninspired, uncharacteristically careless in too many places, it sounded like he has lost interest but still plays to keep up appearances — much the same feeling conveyed by some of his highly touted CDs.



Dennis James (above) and Thom Gall, First Universalist Church Rochester, NY.

Walt Strony, on the other hand, took the 140 ranks of Holy Trinity's classical Möller and made more honest, inspired music in one hour than we heard for the rest of the convention. Though he is not too widely known for playing the classics, Strony presented a program full of dramatic contrasts exquisitely drawn from the organ's vast resources. He even gave us a classical version of the Crawford Stroll in a delightful French "Sortie." His inability to find the pulse during a rather rough reading of a Bach Prelude and Fugue reinforced the notion demonstrated several times that morning that the more he uses sheet music, the less he plays from the heart. The high point of the weekend came after Walt was handed the names of three hymn tunes in a sealed envelope and proceeded to improvise, cold, a brilliant series of variations on each in the French Romantic style. Had this writer not been in on the selection of tunes, it would have been hard to believe it was unrehearsed. The audience was on its feet shouting for more.

The busses left late for Rochester, held up while the drivers ate their box lunches along with the rest of us. (Why do these plastic treats always come with a piece of fruit so hard that those of us with caps, crowns or partials don't dare eat it?)

The organ in First Universalist Church is the first instrument designed and built entirely by Robert Hope-Jones. As such, it embodies a number of his radical (for 1908) theories of construction and tone. Dennis James, a musician with his fingers in many period pies, was the perfect organist to show it off, and his turn-of-the-century program with lyric tenor Thom Gall was the perfect vehicle. Barely audible at times, sounding underwinded and with no appreciable tremors, the 3/13 Hope-Jones was a bit of a let-down to those who think of RH-J as the grandfather of the Mighty Wurlitzer. But it is a virtually mint example of what he could do at the time when left on his own. The voicing and tone were sweet and lovely, and it was ideal as an accompanimental instrument. We perhaps could have done without the episodic "Battle of Trenton"; even Gall reciting titles and beating a field drum in full battle dress couldn't save what was essentially bad silent film music without the film. But the rest of the duets and organ solos made for a pleasant and unique concert that may have been just a touch too long.

Ron Rhode's concert was so unforgivably rushed that the emcee didn't even take time to tell us who was playing. The 4/22 RTOS Wurlitzer still sounds as lush and clear as ever, as does Ron's playing. It was, again, the perfect match of organist and instrument. His typically variegated program was filled with the unusual oldies he is known for — represented in this case by a Pearl White-ish "Doodley-Doo," a frolicsome "Who" and a British selection (from Noel Gay's *Me And My Girl*) played in the American



Conventioneers enthralled by newly restored Wurlitzer Apollo Reproducing Grand Piano (theatre's original) on the Musicians' Gallery.



L. to R: Tim Needler, Dwight Thomas, Bob Goldstine, Louis Shindler at welcoming reception, Shea's Buffalo's lobby.





Dave Junchen (left) and Preston Kaufmann at the closing cocktail party, Buffalo Hilton.



Robert Wolfe, far right, enjoying the closing cocktail party with his manager David Cates, left, and Geoffrey Paterson, Buffalo Area Chapter member from Toronto.

style. But by rushing through the slower pieces, he caused his normally impeccable phrasing, tempo and accuracy to suffer markedly. And, like Larsen before him, the spark was missing.

The word was out that a new console star was about to be born that evening at Shea's, and Dwight Thomas was fully aware of the high level of expectation in the audience. That it made him extremely nervous was plainly, sometimes painfully, obvious through the entire program; the relaxed sparkle he displays at his Indianapolis home base was missing from this, his first full-length convention concert. Despite this unfortunate circumstance, he came across with humor, charm and a level of musical taste that has the potential of developing into something special. One hopes he will soon break away from the all-too-obvious influences of those he admires and thus avoid becoming yet another clone. Certainly his program was varied, but most of it had been done already. Give us more "finds" like that Farnonesque Ampico roll novelty, "Ivory Tips!" He showed lots of imagination in his accents and bridge-work throughout the concert, but the registrations have been done to death. His performance of Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2" was exquisitely orchestrated, smooth and exciting. Dwight Thomas is one to watch closely, because he's heading for the top.

Britain's Robert Wolfe is a bouncy bundle of energy who puts on a show like nobody else. His "schtick" is a style of performance popularized in the seaside resort of Blackpool by the late Reginald Dixon; Robert has taken the Dixon sound, put in some Horace Finch and some Ernest Broadbent, mixed it in his own way and come up with a first-class entertainment. While anathema to some who find the sound and style hard to accept at face value, the show was the liveliest of the weekend. The Riviera's lighting and effects people had a field day

while Robert bubbled and bounced briskly through about two hours of quick-steps, waltzes, marches, foxtrots, serenades, ballads and rags. Registered mostly by hand over a few key piston settings, the 3/20 Wurlitzer produced some of the most uncommon and extraordinary sounds ever heard — a refreshing change from the Crawford/Wright school. The decibel level of the organ borders on the intolerable — there is little subtlety in the instrument anymore. Wolfe got the only half-time standing ovation of the convention and, an indication that, while he may not appeal to some, his popularity in North America is nevertheless real.

A quick stop at the old Wurlitzer factory, now a run-down warehouse and small business center, served to sadly remind us of what once was the busiest pipe organ factory in the world. Aside from the faded Wurlitzer name atop the tower, the only hint of organs about the vast complex is a Lowrey organ dealer on the ground floor.

Hector Olivera closed the weekend for us with an over arranged, drawn-out performance during which he made imaginative and thorough use of the organ's resources. He rendered set pieces like the Dubois "Toccata," "William Tell Overture," and Vierne "Scherzo" with flair and refinement, but when he got going on a "Trolley Song" in French toccata dress, or a "Sweet Georgia Brown" in jazz idiom, he just didn't know when to stop. During the latter, he did an extended solo on drums and cymbals alone which was brilliant, but even that was twice as long as it needed to be. And talk! We not only heard about how he was hired to play the concert and all about the new baby, we even got a lecture on the relative merits of pipes and electronics in a tone of voice that was insulting the audience to say the least and that turned this writer off for the rest of the concert, but most of the audience was eating out of the palm of his hand.

The closing party in the Hilton's nightclub made up for it, however, and was a great finish to a great weekend. Considering that nobody on the Convention Committee had ever run a convention before, much less been to one, the feeling is that they did a first-class job. This writer has to note a few small things which would improve future conventions: neither emcee bothered to tell us who he was (each happened to be a co-chairman); some organists played gorgeous numbers and didn't bother to tell us the title; the record shop was only open once, after the Hector Olivera concert; and, a substitution of school busses for highway coaches on Saturday should have been explained and apologized for much sooner. And please, anyone who stages concerts, make sure the PA system works, make sure the organist knows *how* it works (does he switch it on or does a sound man?) and, most important, make sure your spotlight people know how to light a horse-shoe console properly and steadily.

To the Buffalo Convention Committee and all those who helped in big and little ways, hats off and thanks for a lot of good music and good fun.



## THANK YOU!

From the Buffalo Area Chapter to all the wonderful people who shuffled off to Buffalo. We made a lot of new friends, and you made a great weekend even better!







Allen Miller (left) with Shea's organ maintenance crew members Warren Miller, John Shaffer, Michael Mancuso (front).



Convention Committee and members of Shea's organ maintenance crew, from left: Warren Miller, Michael Mancuso, Tim Schramm, Laura Whitley, Wayne Rettke, John Shaffer, Maureen Wilke, Allen Miller, Craig Whitley.



Buffalo Area Chapter members from left: Craig Whitley, Warren Miller, L. Curt Mangel, Maureen Wilke. Front: John Shaffer. Closing Cocktail Party.

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