

The Mouse That Roars

by Ron Musselman

All Pictures from DeLay Collection

That old saying, "Big things come in small packages," can certainly be applied to some of the smaller theatre organs built in the 1920s. And I'm not even referring to something as "large" as a 10-rank Wurlitzer, Style 216, certainly one of the most ambitious two-manual pipe organs ever turned out by any maker . . . or even the later eight-rank "master blasters" that were built for English installations where maximum pizzazz from a minimum number of voices was the primary aim. The machine I'm talking about was the workhorse of hundreds of small-town movie houses and neighborhood theatres; the little three or four-rank instruments that are generally considered to be the smallest packages that can be called a "complete" basic organ, as opposed to instruments in the Photoplayer classification, which would usually consist of an upright piano, traps and only a couple of partial pipe ranks on perhaps five inches of wind.

Our society's journal has featured a number of smaller home installations of various origins over the years, but rarely has any form of an original Wurlitzer with a piano console even been mentioned, and these instruments were far from being a rare species during the era of their manufacture: Wurlitzer alone produced over 500 of these smaller units. Since Wurlitzer built over 2,200 pipe organs, this means that almost one Wurlitzer in four was a small organ, typically three or four ranks, with a piano console. Why was the survival rate of this style of instrument so poor? For one thing, in the smaller movie houses where such an organ would be found, space was often at a premium, and when talkies turned the theatre organ into excess baggage where it had previously been a necessity, the course of action that made the most sense to a typical owner/manager was to either sell the organ to the church or mortuary making the first reasonable offer, or simply hire someone to rip it out and haul the remains to the city dump. These smaller voices of the silver screen usually had earned their keep long before retirement, so the owners didn't generally feel they were wasting much by tossing them on the scrap heap. Even if the operation included organ music into the talkie era, instruments in this category were considered to have been more useful as silent movie accompaniment than as a solo instrument. And besides, a three or four-rank organ represented a relatively modest investment.

Of the 500 or so of these smallest Wurlitzer theatre pipe organs with piano consoles, the largest number of any single model built was the style 135, which, with four ranks of pipes, was similar to the style B, which had a regular horse-shoe console. Some larger piano-console models were also produced: The style 160 had six ranks of pipework, while the early style V boasted eight, although, like all of its smaller brothers, including the three-rank units, a Tibia Clausa or horse-shoe console was not standard. The smallest three-rank organs of this group included variants that were given model numbers of 105, 108, 109 and 110.



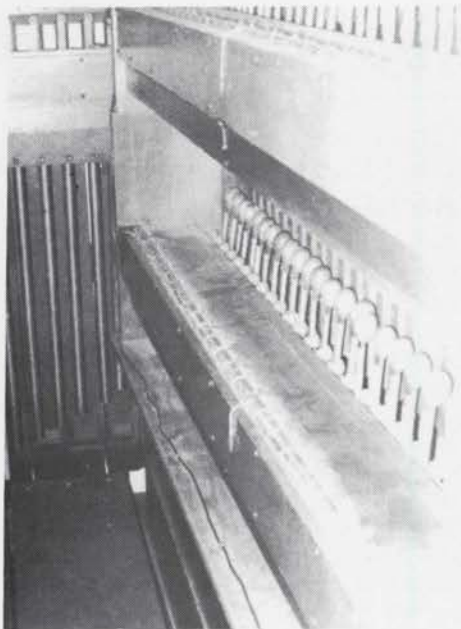
Piano consoles typically had 88-note Piano/Accompaniment and 61-note Solo manuals. Pedal board was typical Wurlitzer design. Style 109-C Opus 777 of 1924.

The piano console was normally placed in the orchestra pit with a large vacuum pump behind the console to operate the roll player or players, if such options were included. The chests and relay were housed in a fairly compact swellbox that could be installed in a regular chamber space adjacent to the proscenium arch, directly behind the screen, or just about anywhere on the stage that space was available.

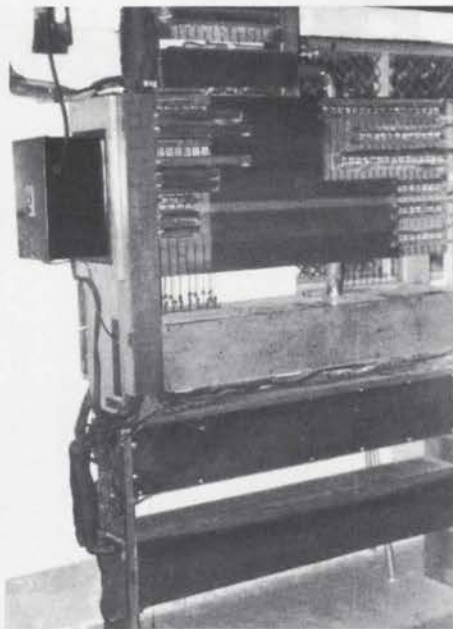
It really is unfortunate that more of these unique examples of "entry-level theatre pipe organ" didn't survive into the present. However, a few of them still exist, and one of these is a Wurlitzer Style 109 owned by Tom DeLay and installed in his Fresno, California, residence where it gets a good deal of use and loving care. Tom already owned a well-

unified 2/3 Maas, but had toyed with the idea, on-and-off for several years, of moving up to something more theatrical and a little larger, perhaps six or seven ranks, but not so large that maintenance would be too time-consuming. And to the true enthusiast, what better centerpiece is there for the family room than a well-proportioned horseshoe console? But when he heard about the availability of a basically sound piano-console 109, his sights were reset. The thought of owning such a unique instrument, and keeping it in its original configuration, intrigued him. The organ was located in downtown Los Angeles at the Bresee Brothers and Gillette Mortuary on West Washington Street's "Mortuary Row." It had been re-installed there in 1930, and was found to be virtually intact, although the traps had been removed. In checking its history it was found that his Style 109, Opus 777, was a well-traveled organ. Before its long gig at the mortuary, it had been installed in the Kinema Theatre in Graham, California. Prior to that, it occupied its original home, the G.A. Bush Theatre in San Diego where it had been installed in January of 1924.

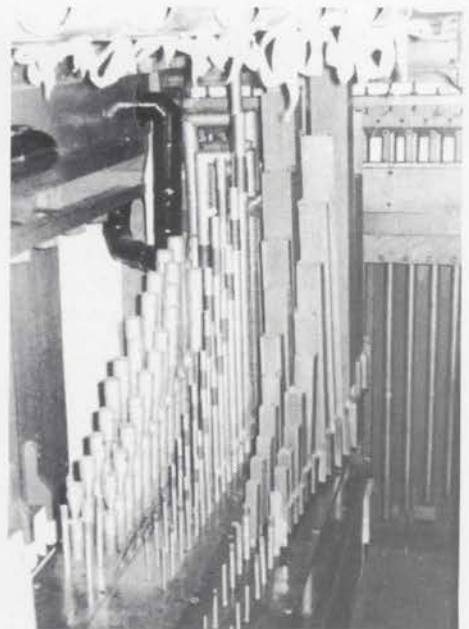
In this model, the player operated only the bottom, or piano, keyboard which also functions as the Accompaniment manual, which plays from 85 of the piano's 88 keys. Stops for the Accompaniment manual are divided at middle F# and G for bass and treble stops. So, for any given stop register available, there are two stops per pitch. As a result, manually, you can register Accompaniment and Solo stops on the piano keyboard and actually play Accompaniment and Solo on the same division. This is a direct throwback to the pneumatic photoplayers with their separate cabinets of bass and treble pipes. The 88-note Accompaniment plays by ordinary piano rolls. Above the Piano/Accompaniment keyboard is a standard 61-note "Solo" organ manual, which is independent of the player function. And above the Solo manual, running parallel to it, is a single stop rail of the familiar tongue-shaped stop tabs. Incidentally, the piano has an interesting feature that should be mentioned. In normal operation of the organ with the wind on, the piano stop must be drawn before the piano will sound. But with the wind off, the piano becomes a purely standard instrument and can be played as a conventional upright. This feature must have come in handy more than once during these instruments' tor-



Tonal percussions are stacked on top of each other, with 18-note chimes at the chamber back.



Union board side of 2/3, Style 109 Wurlitzer relay.



Chamber of the Style 109. L-R: Vox Humana, Salicional, Flute. Note offset String pipes horizontally across ceiling along with tricky mitering of lowest manual chest Salicional pipes.

Let's all tip our hats to the handful of theatre organ owners who have remained faithful to the principle of authenticity.

It has been their strong sense of history that has saved a rare bird from extinction.

turous schedules in their original habitats. If there was a serious malfunction that made the unit unplayable as a complete organ, at least the pit musician still had a piano to work with. The massive upright piano/console with its straight stop rail and full pedalboard is a rather imposing sight viewed firsthand, and with its medium oak finish, a really nice piece of furniture.

As is the case with most small, lower-priced Wurlitzers, the relay keying has no primaries, while stop action does have primary pneumatics. The Pedal stops are keyed directly without the use of a relay. The rank complement is a fairly standard 85-pipe Bourdon-Flute, 73-pipe Salicional (string) and 61-pipe Vox Humana, all of which are operated by a single regulator on ten inches of wind. Tuned percussions are plentiful for an instrument of this size, and include Glockenspiel, Xylophone and Chimes. All of these and the swell shades operate from a standard Wurlitzer "winder" regulated to 12" of wind. Tom did make one modification to the original winding setup: He took the offset 16' and 8' Bourdon-Flute and 8' string off tremulated wind and put them on a standard winder. He fabricated a plaster-coated chamber that adjoins his music room and re-installed the organ along Wurlitzer



The "other" organ.

DeLay's 2/3 Louis Maas organ of 1931.

Continued on next page ...

principles, using original Wurlitzer zinc windline with no plastic pipe or flex tubing utilized on any portion of the wind supply. In fact, nowhere in the instrument will be found any synthetic materials used in place of the original basic construction.

While installed in the mortuary, the organ had been quite badly damaged by water. Anyone who has ever had to deal with warped topboards of a Wurlitzer chest will appreciate what was confronted when restoring them. The topboard laminations had separated, causing severe bleeding to surrounding notes. Fortunately, there were only three ranks of pipe chests and percussions to restore. In view of the fact that even this relatively small project was a time-consuming operation, Tom states that he has the utmost respect for those involved in much larger home projects involving 15 ranks or more. When Tom was swamped with commercial work (He owns and operates Central California Pipe Organ Service), he opted to call for the excellent services of Richard S. Villemin in nearby Porterville for some of the necessary re-leathering. Mr. Villemin also supplied the original Wurlitzer zinc windlines with factory-made 90-degree elbows.

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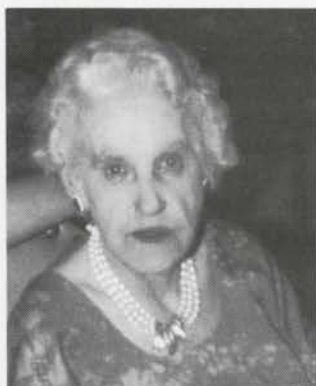
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Although Tom purchased this organ primarily to have a true theatre organ to play for his own amusement and to preserve a unique product of Wurlitzer's pipe organ days, some other benefits have been realized. On a trip through Fresno, Bob Vaughn (the Bay Area's renowned genuine silent movie organist) stopped by to play the 109 and found it to be a very similar experience to playing some of the smaller organs in the Southern California houses he worked in the '20s. Although it is much smaller than the mid-size Wurlitzer he had played for years at the late Avenue Theatre in San Francisco, Bob spent a good deal of time playing it and obviously had a great time "getting back to the basic tool of the trade." He reminded us that "not every organist had a marvelous three or four-manual instrument with everything on it" to work with, and that the true test of a silent picture organist is "not what he can do with two-dozen ranks, but with six . . . or less." And what he did with only three ranks that afternoon illustrated his point beautifully.

After the final event of the 1984 Fresno mini-convention, Candi Carley and Larry Vanucci dropped in for a go at the Wurlitzer, and it proved to be an event that rivaled what had been heard by the general public a few hours earlier on much larger instruments. Candi and Larry took turns at the bench, then teamed up for an extended jam session that will not be forgotten by those who were present. Larry, in particular, seemed extremely pleased with what he got from the organ. The "Vanooch" doesn't need an array of crackly reeds and a Post Horn to get down and get funky. He treated us to a liberal dose of his special brand of "improvised conglomeration of blues/barrel-house/jazz," sometimes laughing out loud when he turned out a really juicy riff. When he returned home to the Bay Area, Larry proclaimed to his friends and colleagues that he had found "the ultimate bar instrument."

Tom walked out to his music room the next morning, stared at the console, and mentally replayed as much as he could remember from the night before. Two thoughts were running through his mind. One was a feeling of disbelief that so much variety could be pulled out of three ranks of pipework. The other was the realization that he felt no temptation to succumb to "expansionitis." Let's all tip our hats to the handful of theatre organ owners who have remained faithful to the principle of authenticity. It has been their strong sense of history that has saved a rare bird from extinction.

CLOSING CHORD



ANNIE OLIVE

On October 24 theatre organ's most devoted and fun-loving fan passed away peacefully following a brief illness and coma.

Annie Olive is survived by several nieces, a nephew, and all the members of LATOS and the American Theatre Organ Society, as she was, without doubt, the best known and most loved person in our organ world. Annie enjoyed every concert, convention and social she attended — and she enjoyed them to the fullest!

Her 79th birthday was just a week before her death. She was born Anna Lees in England. As she and her husband "Mugsy" Olive had no children of their own, Annie "adopted" organists and organ buffs as her "family."

For years she drove her ancient Plymouth Valiant to every Southern California organ event. This prompted the late organist Bill Thomson to compose one of his most delightful and descriptive compositions, "Valiant Annie."

In memory of this well-loved lady, the Los Angeles Theatre Organ Society has established the Annie Olive Memorial Scholarship Fund. Her enthusiasm, happiness and love of life will continue with us always. And now, as Annie would say, "Let's party!"

Organist Esther DuBoff, 87, Dies; Played for Silent Films, Recitals

Esther Leaf DuBoff, organist and one of Omaha's first and last accompanists for silent movies, died Friday, September 30, at a local hospital, where she was being treated for post-surgical complications.

The widow of violinist-turned-business man Harry DuBoff, she was 87.

Mrs. DuBoff was 12 when she got her first job as an accompanist, playing piano for a "picture show" at the Parlor Theatre.

Eventually she played massive pipe organs at some of the finest film palaces in the country, including the world's largest, the Paramount in Los Angeles. She also played at New York's Paramount Studio organ over the CBS radio network.

She gave numerous organ recitals through the years after the demise of silent films and in recent years accompanied several presentations of silent film classics.

Dr. Eugene DuBoff, a Denver psychiatrist, said his mother remained "very active, very dynamic" until recently and had continued to play for weddings and funerals.

Mrs. DuBoff's sister, Ann Leaf, also was a widely known organist and silent-film accompanist who also played for radio soap operas. She lives in Los Angeles.

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*Music is the medicine
of a
troubled mind.*

WALKER HADDON c. 1567
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