

Jesse The Great!

by J. Marion Martin

When I was a little boy, I used to listen to 78 rpm Blue Bird recordings of Jesse Crawford. The recording really left something to be desired, but I thought he was great. He was my idol. It was my ambition to some day rise up out of a pit on a great white and gold Wurlitzer like Jesse. To everyone, Jesse was tops. He was the one and only Poet of the Organ, presiding over the great cream and gold console of the Mighty Wurlitzer in the New York's Times Square Paramount Theatre. Jesse was undoubtedly the King of the Theatre Organists.

This, however, is not to say that he was the best. Most musicians felt that Don Baker (at the same console), Dick Leibert (at the Brooklyn Paramount Wurlitzer) and Lew White (at Roxy's Kimball) were all in better command of their instruments, and were much better showmen. Crawford had a reputation of being sort of an untouchable ethereal god. Crawford's forte was the simple ballad, played on sobbing tibias and vox humanae, with portamente every other measure — pure schmalz, which hypnotized his fans into simple adoration. If Jesse ever received an adverse review of his performances, you never saw it then, or hear about it today. He is still portrayed as the one and only perfect theatre organist.

In 1933, Duke University's Quadrangle Theatre and School of Movie Palace Operations installed a 3/10 Wurlitzer Special, with a Post Horn, two Xylophones, Marimba Harp, Chrysoglott, Tuned Sleigh Bells, Orchestra Bells, and Cathedral Chimes in its 1750-seat house. The organ was opened in November by Lew White, who really made the instrument stand up and sing. We were very pleased with the audience reception of the concerts, and most proud of our new Wurlitzer.

About a month later, Mr. Upchurch, the theatre manager called me into his office. He told me, as producer, to plan something very big, very special for the next week, for the Great Jesse Crawford would be seated at our Wurlitzer. We both felt that it was a feather in our caps to be able to even book the great star into a theatre of our size.

At 9:30 on a Monday morning Jesse arrived, driving a huge van which he immediately began to unload into our stage door. We had no idea what was going on. The stuff he was unloading was something new — a Hammond Electric Organ, with all its cable and speakers. Bob Van Camp, our house organist, was

<p>Saturday, February 26 In Person JESSE CRAWFORD "The Poet of the Organ" appearing at 3:00, 7:30 and 9:30 On the Screen at 1:45, 4:10, 6:10, 8:15 and 10:15 "DANGER—LOVE AT WORK" with Ann Sothorn, Jack Haley, Mary Boland and E. E. Horton. Also News and Walt Disney Cartoon. Continuous Performances 1-11:30. Adm. 25c & 10c</p>
<p>Wednesday, February 23 "DEAD END" with Sylvia Sidney and Joel McCrea</p>
<p>Wednesday, March 2 "LIFE BEGINS IN COLLEGE" with the Ritz Brothers</p>
<p>Saturday, March 5 "THE BRIDE WORE RED" with Joan Crawford and Franchot Tone</p>
<p>Wednesday, March 9 "VOGUES OF 1938" with Warner Baxter and Joan Bennett</p>
<p>Saturday, March 12 "MUSIC FOR MADAME" with Nino Martini, Joan Fontaine, Alan Mowbray</p>
<p>Wednesday, March 16 "DOUBLE WEDDING" with William Powell and Myrna Loy</p>

Shows Every Wed. and Sat. 1—11 p.m. **Quadrangle Pictures** Admission Mat 15c; 10c Eve. 25c; 10c
PAGE AUDITORIUM
Duke University

out of the theatre at this time, and as producer it was my job to meet with Jesse, welcome him, show him to his dressing room and work out practice time for him.

After greeting Jesse and receiving some nice, favorable comments about the theatre from him, I began to question him about the pile of speakers, pedals, and keyboards in the middle of our stage. With a big smile on his face, he replied, "Oh! I'm not going to play your house organ. That is just another Wurlitzer. This is the organ I shall use in my part of your show." I was aghast. Reaching into the switchboard cage, I picked up a phone and called the theatre manager's office, explaining the situation to him. He was on the stage almost before I hung up the phone.

After an hour of hot discussion, we came to a compromise. Jesse would open the show with fifteen minutes of the Wurlitzer, then go on stage for ten minutes with his Hammond (whose speakers had been placed in our organ chambers), and close the show with ten minutes of Crawford on the Hammond and Bob Van Camp at the Wurlitzer, playing together. We were so sure that in Crawford we had

the top drawing card, he was given top billing in all advertisements, not even mentioning the Bob Crosby Band on our stage.

It was 12:15 and Jesse had not even looked at the house organ that he was to play at 3:00. The house would open at one o'clock with Van Camp at the Wurlitzer. I asked him if he wanted to set up combinations or run over something on the house organ. His reply was, "It's just another damn Wurlitzer." I told him that there were a couple of strange things about it. The pedal pistons are on buttons on the bottom manual left cheek. He interrupted with, "And the 8' Great Tibia Second Touch is really the 16' Great Tibia First Touch."

He played the show cold, without ever looking at the Wurlitzer, or trying out combinations before he crawled on the bench, and it sounded like it. He would try a combination and if he did not like it, he would try another two or three. Our patrons were used to hearing much better music from our own Bob Van Camp, and it certainly could not come up to Lew White.

Then he left the Wurlitzer and moved up on stage to his Hammond. Here he played his usual schmalzy ballads, but the Hammond's synthetic tibias could not sob like Mr. Wurlitzer's could. For the great finale he did a medley of nursery rhymes. In the middle of this he went into "Mary Had A Little Lamb" on the pedals alone, with both hands held high above his head doing push-ups. A first year organ student could have done it better. It crashed completely.

The closing selections with Bob at the house organ and Crawford at the Hammond was the only thing that received any applause. They did a medley of "Bells of St. Mary" (using the Wurlitzer's chimes), "Santa Lucia" and "Valencia." This last number was fantastic, with Bob doing most of the work. The only thing good to come out of this visit from Crawford was that he taught me how to play "Valencia."

When the curtain opened on the Bob Crosby Orchestra, there was a deafening ovation from the audience. The following review was written by Hal C. Ress for the *Durham Morning Herald* the next day:

"Bob Crosby's Band was doubly honored at last Saturday night's Swing Session. First the band won third place in the swing band division of DOWN BEAT POPULARITY POLL. Second, two of his

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Thoughts About The 1989 Young Organist Competition

It seems as if our committee's decisions to elect Russell Holmes, John Cook, and Barry Baker have met general approval. I have received no complaint, although I didn't expect any. The winners played well, were always courteous and gentlemanly, and brought credit to their sponsors, teachers, families and friends. I am especially happy with the winners because they exemplified musical characteristics that I like: restraint in registration and dynamics. I like the pedal work of all three, for they were sparing in their use of those muddy old sixteen-foot bourdons, and not one of them was hooked in addition to snarling posthorns that make more noise than music. We had evidence at the Convention that they were competent to play everything to which they professed in their tapes; there could have been no tape-doctoring or double-recording. I had a talk with Russell Holmes about his training and was pleased to find him able to indicate some knowledge of harmony as we talked about triad-inversions, seventh and ninth chords.

Something should be said about music-contest judging. As musicians, we have lasting opinions about composers, compositions, and styles. At such times our prejudices, along with our dislikes of performers and personalities, are showing. For hundreds and perhaps thousands of years musicians have been envious of each other. The famous German critic of the latter half of the nineteenth century, Eduard Hanslick, often thought that the music of Richard Wagner was tasteless and long-winded. In 1881 he reviewed the first performance of Tchaikowski's Violin Concerto, of which he said in effect, "Normally we smell through out noses, but here is music that stinks in our ears." Happily, nothing stank in my ears at the Convention, although the rock-and-rollers are trying hard enough. The Chinese, perceptively have their word for "rock-and-roll": **yao** pronounced **yow**.

Concerning our demands upon the contestants' musicianship, we need to be careful not to make

too rigorous requirements. I think "Embraceable You" was a little too demanding. In his book, **American Popular Song**, Alec Wilder discusses George Gershwin's skill in the use of bass notes, his avoidance of musical cliches, and his ever-moving harmony. This latter characteristic explains why several of our candidates found it necessary to use too slow a tempo for a popular tune that is basically happy and affectionate in spirit. The first measure starts after a quarter-rest, and then imitates it in the second, to be followed by an unexpected phrase in the third. Another unexpected novelty is the eighth-note e-flat in the final cadence (the piece is written in G).

There are two ways to help our young students avoid pitfalls: (1) use popular material in the form A-A-B-A. It is simple and repetitive. Students who can't handle this need ear-training. (2) Have the students sing the songs they are proposing to play. This will insure that they catch the mood and style of any piece before they get carried away into the briar-patches of excessive imitation and mannerism.

Now some words to our young organists. Long ago Sophocles said that the most enviable of our endeavors should be to "grow wise in old age," but music history has usually found that the wisdom of old age is seldom as rewarding as the genius of youth. Youth in music is fine melody; it's like a flower garden full of roses. Young people, please keep the weeds of boredom, incompetence, and evil from choking out the roses. Then may your musical world stay full of roses.

A last word of praise should be given Tony O'Brien who had the courage and the good musicianship to include in his program a composition by German composer Sigfrid Karg-Elert, whose works are not often played or appreciated. Tony's performance had class.

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may be in fit condition to meet their obligations on the lot early the next day. Picture stars who have held their high places are, for the most part, surprisingly orderly persons."

July 29, 1942 (RD) . . .

DOLPH GOEBEL, musical director and organist of WWRL in Woodside, New York, since June 1941, has been named by the U.S. Treasury Dept. to make personal appearances Sundays at Forest Park, Long Island, in behalf of the sale of War Bonds and Stamps. Goebel will be featured at the Hammond, supplying the music for community sings and rallies.

GOLD DUST: 7/38 ERIC THINMAN and REGINALD FOORT over GSG and GSI, England; LEW WHITE, CBS; ARTHUR CHANDLER, Jr., WLW, Cincinnati; Chicago's HAROLD TURNER on MBS playing piano; Canada's ROLAND TODD over MBS; MILTON CHARLES & The Four Notes, CBS . . . 10/38 CHARLES PAUL, CBS; GEORGE LUNDQUIST, WJTN, Jamestown, NY; MARY FOUNTAIN, WHP, Harrisburg, PA; DICK LEIBERT, WJZ, NY; JESSE CRAWFORD, NBC; ROSA RIO on "Between the Bookends" with Ted Malone, NBC; TRUMAN TAYLOR, SWYR, Syracuse; FRANK RENOUT, WORK, York, PA; TOM GRIERSON, WHAM, Rochester; HARRY SPRINGER, WESG, Elmira, NY; JOHNNY HEREFORD, CBS; GUNTHER DECKER, WBNF, Binghamton; ROBERT SMITH, WKBW, Buffalo; MATHILDA & IRENE HARDING on "Twenty Fingers of Melody," CBS; FRED FEIBEL, CBS.

That does it for this time. So long, sourdoughs!

Jason & The Old Prospector

JESSE THE GREAT!

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boys, tenor sax Eddie Miller and pianist Bob Zurke, appeared in solos. Miller played SENTIMENTAL OVER YOU beautifully, and Zurke added variations to BODY AND SOUL in a masterful rendition. Both were splendid . . . Jesse Crawford left me stone cold . . . It is sad but true that he 'Ain't what he used to be!' . . . His execution especially has slipped; too, he has failed to keep up with the trend of modern organ music . . . Maybe I'm wrong, but I like his performance on the house organ much better than his pieces on the Hammond Electric Organ . . . Finis. Hal C. Rees.

Yes, Jesse was a great legend, but he was a mortal, too. Which one among us had not fallen flat on his face at least at one concert. But this is a side of the Poet of the Organ that you never hear about.



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