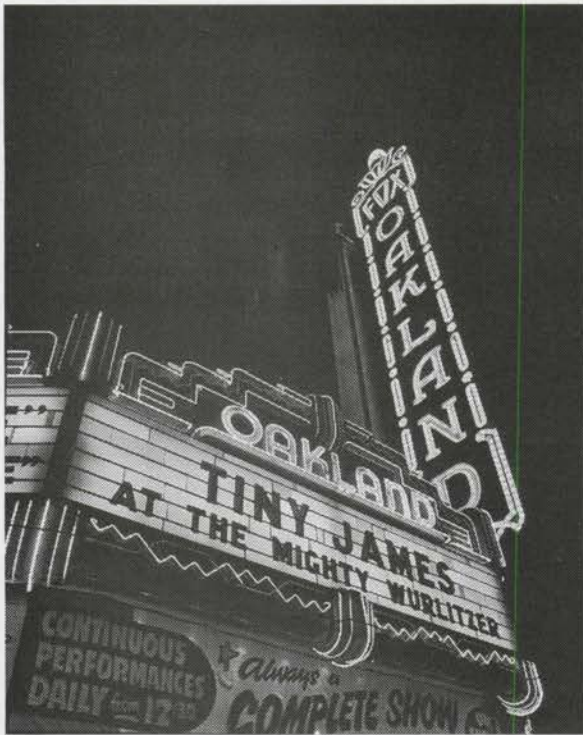


TINY JAMES AT THE ORGAN

by George F. Thompson



With the untimely passing of W. "Tiny" James last May, the ATOS lost one of its most dedicated founders and an organist of great ability as well as a distinctive registration style that was widely copied.



His musical background began in high school where he developed a working knowledge of most instruments in the band and orchestra. His positions in the band and orchestra were tuba and string bass. He studied music seriously and developed a keen interest in orchestration. This led to piano lessons and, upon learning that a theatre organ could be orchestrated, he became fully involved with the pipe organ.

Unfortunately, at the time, silent movies were giving way to sound and the organ lost its prestige, being used only for intermissions, sing-alongs and, once in a while, as an augmentation to the orchestra if a stage program was presented.

Tiny had, by this time, established a friendship with several theatre managers who granted him access to some of the best organs in the Bay Area for practice. Of course it was depression times and, therefore, no funds were available to keep the instruments in good playing condition. It became necessary for a practicing theatre organist to do his own maintenance and repair work as well as use his own funds for parts.

Naturally, income from music declined rapidly except for a small surge in work when the electric organ was introduced. These were put into many cocktail lounges and dance bands. Tiny acted as relief organist for many of the organists who wanted time off.

By the middle 1930s it was apparent that another source of income was needed to survive. Therefore, Tiny, like many others, took on whatever came along. For quite some time he operated the Giant Dipper at the Neptune Beach Amusement Park, a popular entertainment center in the Alameda-Oakland area, now long since closed.

His close association with the theatre industry helped him in becoming a theatre projectionist. He followed this trade for many years as a relief man. He was a member of I.T.S.E. Local 162. All these jobs were on a "when needed" basis, including theatre organ intermission opportunities.

As the economy picked up in the late 1930s the Southern Pacific Railroad began hiring student firemen. Tiny, being a rail fan, decided to apply, was accepted, and having qualified was put to work on the extra board. He soon realized that because of being away from home and not being able to keep up with his music, a more stable form of career was needed.

Tiny became an accountant by self-teaching the basics and then he took a course at a local business school. He became a qualified accountant and took a position in the Alameda County Auditor's Office. The regular hours made it possible to spend time maintaining some usable pipe organs in local theatres, fill in when needed and time to practice. He remained in the Auditor's Office, climbing to the position of Senior Auditor where he remained until his retirement in 1975.

Keeping the remaining theatre organs going had, by this time, become a continuing chore. However, with assistance from fellow enthusiasts, the organs began to perform reliably. Included in this endeavor were Judd Walton, Bob Jacobus, Ron Downer, Fred Clapp, and others. All became Charter Members of ATOS.

At this time a round robin letter was being circulated around the country by Alden Miller of Minneapolis. Miller was a theatre organ buff, and his letter gave out information on programs being given and, on occasion, offered technical hints.

These letters brought into focus the fact that a national organization and a magazine devoted to the subject was feasible. More people were interested in listening to the unique sound of the theatre organ and the preservation of these instruments than had been perceived.

A number of organizational meetings were held in 1954. Many of these meetings were held at the residence of Tiny James, who, together with his friend Judd Walton, did a major portion of the planning. Walton was an official of the California Farm Bureau Federation as



Tiny James standing beside the Fox Theatre, San Francisco, 4/36 Wurlitzer.

Photo: Courtesy of Erwin A. Young

well as an expert on pipe organs, especially Wurlitzer. He obtained the services of Charles Rummel, attorney for the Farm Bureau, to write a suitable set of Bylaws for a non-profit organization such as the Farm Bureau and similar groups.

All the material and input were explored at a meeting at Tiny's home in the late fall of 1954, in which most differences were ironed out. A meeting was then scheduled for February 1955, at the home of the late Richard (Dick) Simonton, in Los Angeles. Since all the groundwork had been done, the February meeting became the first (Charter) meet of the American Theatre Organ Enthusiasts. (This title was changed to "Society" at a later date).

Meanwhile, Tiny felt that a larger membership could be obtained in several ways, one of which was with well-made high fidelity records. Hi-Fi had caught the public's fancy and a good organ solo recording would be a showpiece for a well built hi-fi set.

Cook Records of Stamford, Connecticut, produced a set of 33 RPM's in stereo using a unique two-stylus pick up. These were recorded by Reginald Foort, a gifted organist from England. These records sold well and helped in boosting the number of theatre organ records being planned.

The double stylus system didn't last long. A single split stylus was developed for recording and playback which made the use of stereo more viable.

Tiny and his lodge brother friend, Frank Killinger, a sound engineer and ATOS Charter Member, decided to see what could be done along these lines. The result was a superb disc called "Intermission Time." This was recorded in mono on the Model 235 special Wurlitzer in the Fox Oakland Theatre.

While discussing recordings it must be stated that Tiny made several records, all of them engineered by the late Frank Killinger.

Everett Nourse, staff organist at the palatial San Francisco Fox Theatre housing a beautiful 4/36 Wurlitzer shared four records with Tiny. Everett played one side while the other was soloed by Tiny. The playing style of these organists was very different and allowed for a great variety of music. Frank Killinger engineered these discs with precision, and they were released in stereo.

The organ itself was in concert condition, being kept that way by organ experts, Judd Walton and the late Bob Jacobus. It was a case where the organ was the pride and joy of Robert Apple, Fox Theatre manager. He helped keep the instrument in shape by donating funds when available, to assist the efforts of Bob and Judd who furnished as much of their time as possible.

Other records made using this organ featured the one and only George Wright. Unfortunately, this great film palace was demolished in 1963, and the organ was sold to a private party.

Our man, Tiny, also did justice to the San Francisco Orpheum Theatre Robert-Morton Organ. This was a large 4/22 Morton with excellent tonal qualities which was kept in shape by ATOS member Ron Downer and Orpheum projectionist Ernie Langley.

Aside from his work as an auditor and recording organist, Tiny kept himself busy playing for openings, fashion shows, lodge programs, and whatever came along that used organ music of the popular fashion. He was "hooked" on theatre organ stylings and played with heart and soul, which is evident on all his recordings.

He served as ATOS National President (1961-1964) and was a member of the Board of Directors almost continuously. He was designated as Honorary Member of the Year in 1966.

Tiny also served as Chairman-Manager of the Home Organ Festival. This was an amalgamation of home organ clubs which met annually to see the latest electronic organ products being exhibited by manufacturers, listen to well known organists and take part in nightly jam sessions. It was an informal affair, attended by amateurs from all over the country and fun was had by all. ATOS gained many members from this annual bash and great numbers of authentic theatre pipe organ records were sold.

Tiny James, whose given name was Winfred, was never addressed except by the name "Tiny." He was a large, heavily built person; 6'4" tall, weighing 280 pounds. Large in more ways than size. Although even tempered, he could be provoked when his principles were compromised. He was very outgoing and enjoyed being with people who were enjoying life. All of this entered into his style of playing organ. As a Life Member of Local 6 Musicians Union, he was popular with his contemporaries.



Having a ball on Bill Blunk's 5-manual Marr & Colton at a Jam Session during the 1966 Portland ATOE meeting. Photo Courtesy of Glen James



Above: San Francisco Orpheum gets attention from Tiny James with Ron Downer in the pit, 1975. At left: Tiny James playing at the Fox Oakland for a special showing. Photo taken during intermission. Photos Courtesy of Judd Walton



Tiny and Gaylord Carter comparing notes.

Bill Lamb photo



Tiny with Honorary Member Fanny Wurlitzer at 1964 ATOE meeting.



Tiny and Reginald Foort. Mr. Foort was Honorary Member in 1964.

Bill Lamb photo



Congratulating Honorary Member Erwin Young at 1967 ATOE meet. In the foreground, the late Ben Hall and Al Mason who became ATOE President in 1968.

He played all types of theatre music; ballads with feeling, marches with verve, novelty tunes using his special style of registration, and if any tune would adapt, he would include a chorus of "Chicago Style" to give the music that extra lift.

In listening to his recordings, you will notice the melody is always in the forefront, the accompaniment counter melodies always contained a continuing movement, a product of good orchestration and registration.

While playing, the listeners would see very little movement at the console except for busy hands moving without effort from manual to manual, with an occasional quick flip of a finger for a tab change. Meanwhile, he danced the pedal board with the grace of a ballet performer. His playing was truly poetry in music. He never made unnecessary motions and seemed relaxed and completely engrossed in his playing.

Tiny has now left us, but his bereaved family and host of friends will take some solace in the records he made which will bring back many happy memories.

The console has lowered into the pit and the spotlight has been shut off.



Board of Directors 1966. Tiny James at far right.

Photo Courtesy of Bill Lamb

Note from Paul J. Quarino, Assistant Editor:

I, too, was privileged to know Tiny James through ATOS and the Home Organ Festival. He helped further my career on many occasions. When playing in those Home Organ Festival jam sessions, I would always wait for Tiny to be at one organ before I would join in; then I knew the melody and chords would be as written. He and his music were a great source of inspiration to me. When I made my first theatre organ recording at the San Francisco Orpheum Robert-Morton, in 1975, Tiny was present to help me with the entire session. That made the experience a pleasure. Tiny's contributions to ATOS and the theatre organ world are immeasurable.