

# JEWEL OF THE SOUTH

by Larry Donaldson

It may seem unusual for a theatre manager to contact the American Theatre Organ Society to see if someone can fix his Wurlitzer, but this is exactly what happened at Chattanooga's Tivoli Theatre in October 1983.

As it turned out, the most pressing problem with the Tivoli Wurlitzer style 235 Special was fallen stoppers in Tibias, and tremulants that would not operate reliably. From this start, the Chattanooga Theatre Organ Society, was established in 1984. Several members of CHATTOS are also members of Alabama Chapter where the original call for help was received.

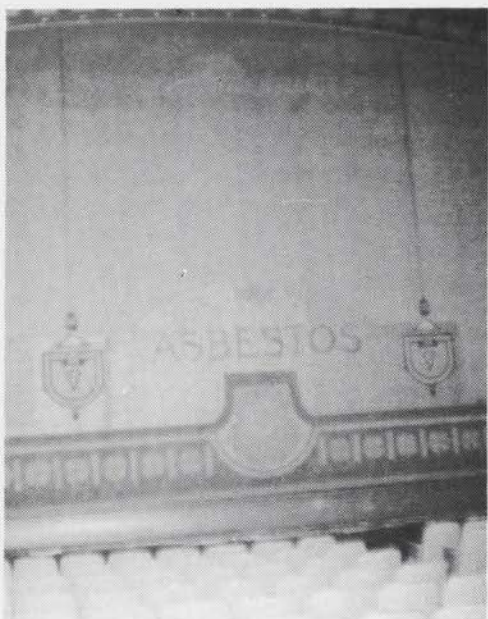
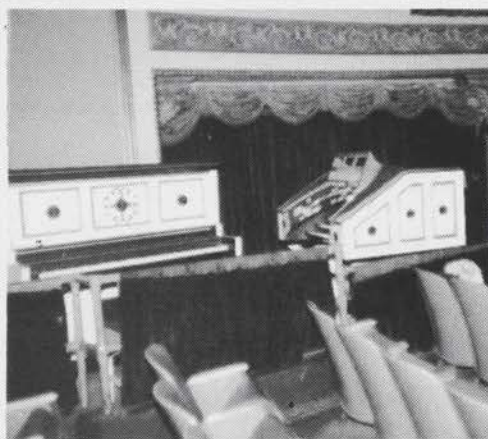
What must be the standard "bill of fare" for starting chapters took place. A small group began meeting weekly at the Tivoli (owned and operated by the City of Chattanooga) to do repairs. The 3/11 Wurlitzer was functional but in much need of TLC (tender loving care). It was installed in 1924, three years after the theatre opened, replacing a Bennett Theatre Organ (assumed to be a 2/8). In 1965, a group of volunteers, headed by local organ builder William Barger, re-connected the console that had been removed from the pit years before. All of the chests were releathered at that time and a Trumpet rank was added to the Main chamber. Several Wurlitzer ranks that had been damaged due to a roof leak were set aside and various replacement ranks were substituted during the 1965 repair.

Both the organ and the theatre seemed very tired. The "Jewel of the South" (as the Tivoli is referred to) was in much need of restoration. It was built by Rapp & Rapp in 1921 as an 1800-seat version of the Chicago Theatre. In 1986, it was decided that the theatre would undergo a complete restoration, including expanding the stage house. The back wall of the stage was moved 14'9" into the street. All original dressing rooms were demolished to expand the wing space. A new, two-story dressing room, rehearsal, and load-in annex was built in a parking lot next door. (Ironic that a parking lot is torn down to expand a movie palace!) CHATTOS was encouraged to make a proposal for restoration of the Wurlitzer as part of the 7.5 million-dollar project. A \$30,000 budget was approved for the organ which would include a new multiplex relay, combination action, restoration of original Wurlitzer reed



▲ John Robere at Tivoli console before restoration.  
 ◀ Tivoli console and piano were moved to main floor box seats below the balcony boxes and Main Chamber.

All photos by author except where noted.



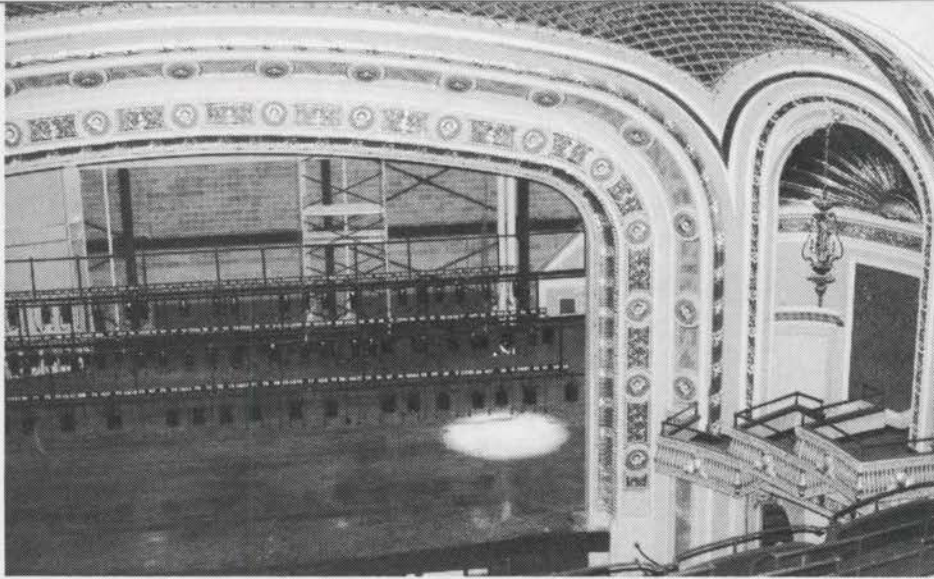
▲ Solo chest before restoration. Notice flex used for Tuba windline.

◀ Asbestos fire curtain was removed during restoration.

▶ Opposite page: Restored box seats.

Richard Parker photo





Expanded Tivoli stage.

Richard Parker photo



Restored decorative plaster.

Gary Jones photo



Solo chest received water damage after the theatre opened.



pipes by TRIVO, addition of a second blower, renovation of the console (including new electric stop actions and tabs), and the releathering of the regulators. The Trumpet, added in the 1965 renovation, would be replaced with a more appropriately voiced Trumpet donated by ATOS member Buddy Boyd. It was later decided to relocate the percussions to an area in the attic that houses the speaker system which is above a decorative grille near the proscenium. This area was originally a ventilation chamber before the days of air-conditioning. In July 1988, a \$1500 grant was received from the Tonya Memorial Foundation of Chattanooga for the construction work needed for the percussions and toy counter.

It was recommended to the architect in charge of the restoration that having a professional organ builder on retainer would be of great service to all concerned. Because of his long association with both the Alabama Chapter and CHATTOS, Lance Johnson of Johnson Organ Company, Fargo, North Dakota, agreed to be the consultant. After a trip to Chattanooga to inspect the organ before the work began, Lance issued a report to the owner stating the condition of the organ, made recommendations for repairs, and would be available for phone consultation in the future. This proved to be a very valuable decision on several occasions. During the installation of the new windline, the contractor substituted taped joints for the soldered joints that were spelled out in Lance's report and the contractor specifications. When this was discovered during an inspection by the CHATTOS crew, the contractor was required to replace all of the newly installed 16" wind line from the blowers in the basement to the chambers. Without a paid outside consultant, it would have been the word of an "amateur" against a trained ventilation "expert" on how to run organ windlines. Also, having Lance review CHATTOS' proposal protected the chapter when the architect started subtracting costs related to the organ, such as wiring and chamber repairs, from the organ budget. The proposal plainly stated that all such repair costs were not included in CHATTOS' budget and the full \$30,000 was eventually released.

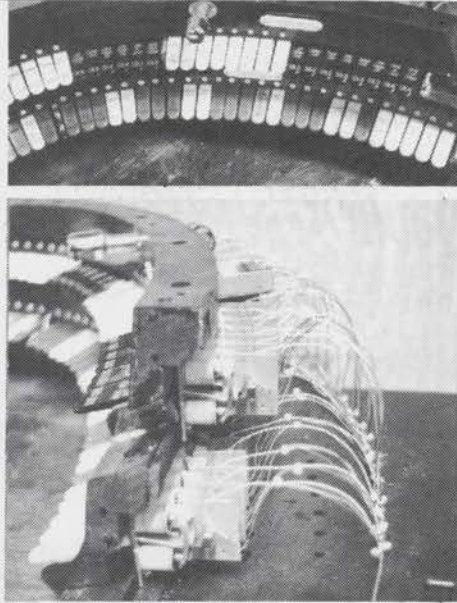
Since the safety of the organ could not be guaranteed during the restoration of the building, the entire organ, except for the manual chests and 16' Diaphone (wood, Kilgen), was moved to storage. During this time, work sessions were held to do as much of the cleaning, re-gasketing, rewiring, and releathering as



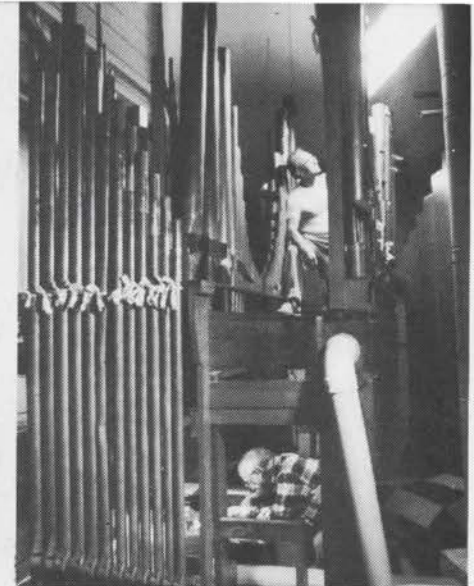


Restored vertical sign.

Richard Parker photo



Top: Bolsters were reveneered by Rick McGee. Electric stop actions were wired by Donna Winn. Buddy Boyd photo



Clyde Stansberry and Jon Robere in Main chamber. Chattanooga News-Free Press, Amy Miles Young photo

possible before moving it back into the chambers. After construction work was complete in the chamber area, installation of the offset chests and regulators was started. The manual chests were still intact and their protective cover was removed. Pipes were put back into the chests.

Why is it that roof problems always occur above pipe organs? Murphy was working overtime! A poorly placed drain from the new stage house roof overwhelmed an attic vent above the Solo chamber. Water collected on the Solo chamber's plaster ceiling and broke through directly above the Tibia manual chest. Water also splattered on the trumpet and worked its way into its chest (formerly the Tuba manual chest). Pipes and chests that did not require any work during the restoration now had to be removed again and repaired. The cost

was minor, but the effect on the CHATTOS crew in both time and morale was devastating. Several additional months of work were now added to the project. Work was shifted to concentrate on getting the Main chamber winded while the water damage was repaired. For future insurance, a ceiling drain was installed in the Solo chamber to safely redirect any future roof leaks into a ventilation shaft.

At the time of this writing, the console work is nearing completion by Walt Winn, Donna Winn, and Rick McGee of Winn Sound, Inc. of Atlanta. All winding in the Main chamber is complete and wiring is underway. All pipework is back in place in both chambers. Winding of the Solo chamber will be starting soon. The percussions were hoisted into their new quarters in the attic before the theatre reopened in March 1989. They will be



Marion Robere cuts leather strips to seal wind trunks. Chattanooga News-Free Press, Amy Miles Young photo



Bill Donaldson, Staley McPeak, and Larry Donaldson inspect Solo chest.

Chattanooga News-Free Press, Amy Miles Young photo

winded and wired as the last phase of the installation. The CHATTOS crew meets on alternate Saturdays, depending on the theatre's schedule.

CHATTOS is very fortunate to have had the support of the Tivoli Theatre management from the very start of this project. Thanks to the Tivoli's former manager, Clyde Hawkins, who insisted that the "city fathers" include CHATTOS in the Tivoli restoration plans. A special THANK YOU to David Johnson, Manager of the Tivoli and Memorial Auditorium, who sees that our bills are paid; and Bob Hobgood, Stage Manager for the Tivoli, who sees that time is provided for work sessions.

More to come!

*Tivoli installation crew:*  
John Robere, Marion Robere, Clyde Stansberry, Rick Brown, Staley McPeak, Bill Donaldson, Larry Donaldson, Chief.