



Piper Music Palace (nee Organ Piper).

Dean Johnson photo.

Milwaukee's Piper Music Palace Evolves

by Gordon Schwacke

Inspiration, perspiration, transformation, those were the chief ingredients in the evolution of Milwaukee's Organ Piper to its new personality as the Piper Music Palace.

The story begins in 1976, the outset of the halcyon days of the organ-equipped pizza restaurants in Milwaukee. In mid-year Pipe Organ Pizza opened at Sixth and Oklahoma on the southside with house organist Walt Strony at the console of the Moller/Wurlitzer. In December the Organ Piper came on the scene.

Gary Hanson, Dairyland Theatre Organ Society's V.P., recalls driving out to see the Organ Piper the week it opened. It seemed an unlikely location — an undeveloped area on a lonely highway in the southwest suburban corner of Milwaukee County. Once inside, he found it a fairly small room in a converted commercial building. The decor was "plain rustic" with table and bench seating to handle about 100. Featured was a made-over Moller pipe organ from a lodge auditorium. Installation was less than the best; it was poorly unified, and under-winded.

Time marched on. Gary was involved with the Pipe Organ Pizza (where Clark Wilson became house organist in 1978 after Walt Strony left for Phoenix), and then went on to ownership of a downtown Milwaukee deli-restaurant. Ten years later, in 1986, the Organ Piper had been through a succession of owners and enjoyed relatively good business. The building had been enlarged with seating increased to 250.

The love of the theatre organ and interest in the pizza restaurant concept, which remained with Gary, furnished the inspiration when in 1986 the owners of the Organ Piper offered to sell him stock in it. The restaurant was "tired," and the Moller, which had never been rebuilt, was worn out, but he saw potential. Among the encouraging factors, by 1986 what had been a remote suburban area was now in a busy growth pattern. Gary bought the stock and, in time, the entire business.

Meanwhile, The Pipe Organ Pizza in Milwaukee had closed in 1984. Among the parts which went into storage were a three-manual Kimball console with Z-

Tronics relay, two Wurlitzer chests of 10 ranks, and Wurlitzer toy counters and percussions. The remaining pipework was a Wurlitzer Style D Trumpet, Flute and Vox Humana. Gary decided this would be the nucleus of a replacement for the Moller! But where was the rest of the "new" organ to come from in this project which would reach completion in stages over five years?

Lady Luck played her part when one day in 1987 a phone call brought Gary news of a Madison, Wisconsin, church replacing its Kimball theatre organ with a tracker. A trip to Madison uncovered the fact that it was the Kimball Hall recital



Changeover in process — Moller (left), Kimball.



Piper Music Palace — BEFORE . . .

organ moved to the church from Chicago in the '20s! Its 39 ranks of pipework were in pristine condition, but the horseshoe console had been replaced with a new drawknob console 20 years ago.

An enthused Hanson phoned Clark Wilson, his friend and a Kimball organ buff, about the find. Because of the instrument's size and some of its "liturgical" ranks, they decided to split it, with Clark using much of it for his own organ installation projects.

What parts were melded to make music with the new organ? Ten ranks of Wurlitzer chests became 27 ranks of Wurlitzer mechanics utilizing 18 ranks from the Kimball and nine Wurlitzer ranks. From the Kimball came all the reeds, six ranks of strings and two diapasons — truly the "heart" of the Kimball Hall pipework. The distinctive Wurlitzer sound includes two Tibias — both a regular and solo scale — two Concert Flutes, two Vox Humanas, two Strings and a Tuba Horn. All the chamber installation was done with either the original lumber or poplar lumber milled to Wurlitzer specs; all winding is done in soldered metal pipe.

The 1929 Kimball console, which started life in the Sheepshead Theatre, Brooklyn, New York, was refinished in the original black. The stop rails originally had 100 stops. This was increased to 180, and the piston rails from 27 to 60 pistons. Gary kept it a wind console with blow boxes used from other Kimball consoles. The combination action is a Peterson Memory.

Now came the true *perspiration and transformation phase!* 1899-89 was the hectic period of the actual changeover from the Moller to the Kimball/Wurlitzer. This is Gary Hanson's report of how it was accomplished: "We gutted the Main chamber and used only the Solo chamber as the organ. We moved some of the old

Main ranks to the Solo to keep the instrument playable. The "new" Main was then installed, the Kimball console was wired to the Main chamber, and new swell shutters were installed. The Main completed, it became the playing organ . . . in fact for a few days the Moller console played the Solo chamber, and the Kimball played the Main!

"When the Main was completed, the Moller console was removed, the Solo chamber was emptied and new shutters installed. About five months later both the Main and Solo chambers were fairly complete. And never in the period of over one year that the changeover involved did the organ music ever cease."

Gary, Clark Wilson (consultant and co-worker), Jim Petersen and Fred Wolfgram, and others who helped make the dream a reality, had done well! The transformation was complete! Now to convey

to the public the fact that there was, in essence, a new food and entertainment spot they should experience. And "new" wasn't overstating it. "Transformation" applied both to the instrument and to the restaurant's decor. The message was communicated with a new name — The Organ Piper became the Piper Music Palace!

It was entirely fitting that Clark Wilson play the dedication concert on the "new instrument" . . . and to a full house, on December 3, 1989. Interestingly, the Piper Music Palace, with a "new" organ, 14 years after its original opening as the Organ Piper, is probably unique among pizza/organ restaurants in having installed a totally different instrument using *nothing* from its previous installation.

Among the artists who have recently visited the Piper to play the Kimball/Wurlitzer are Simon Gledhill, David Lowe, Jack Moelmann, Walt Strony and Clark Wilson. The Piper has also enjoyed visits from members, ATOS chapters, near and far, and has hosted many DTOS events.

The house features organist David Wickerham, originally from the Phoenix/Tucson area. He played for Bill Brown's Organ Stop Pizza in Phoenix and for Pipes and Pizza in Lansing, Illinois, prior to coming to the Piper. Dave brings an exciting style to the music and has received an excellent audience response at the Piper.

Visit the Piper Music Palace any weekend to see that the pizza/organ concept is alive and well in the Milwaukee area. Patrons from the younger, older and in-between generations are enjoying it! Fine food, a fine organ and quality musicianship is a winning combination at the Piper today . . . and it will be for the ATOS Regional in November — MILWAUKEE FUN IN '91!



. . . AND AFTER.