



Convention headquarters, Hyatt Regency Milwaukee from MacArthur Square.

MILWAUKEE FUN IN '91

by Gordon Schwacke

It's About Time!

We agree, it is about time that the Dairyland Theatre Organ Society (DTOS) hosted its fellow ATOSers for a Regional Convention! After all, the Badger State did play a rather significant role in bringing the enjoyment of the theatre organ to many, many communities across the nation. We're referring, of course, to all the theatre organs Dan Barton shipped from his plant in Oshkosh in the halcyon days. And DTOS, having come on the scene in 1969, is not exactly new to ATOS.

Speaking of Dan Barton, we should note that Dan was a part of DTOS from its inception. He was listed in the membership as "Retired organ builder," was elected Honorary Lifetime Chairman and Honorary Member and remained active in the chapter until his death in 1974. Mrs. Helen Barton was made an Honorary Member in 1975, and Dan is remembered in the name of our newsletter, BARTOLA.

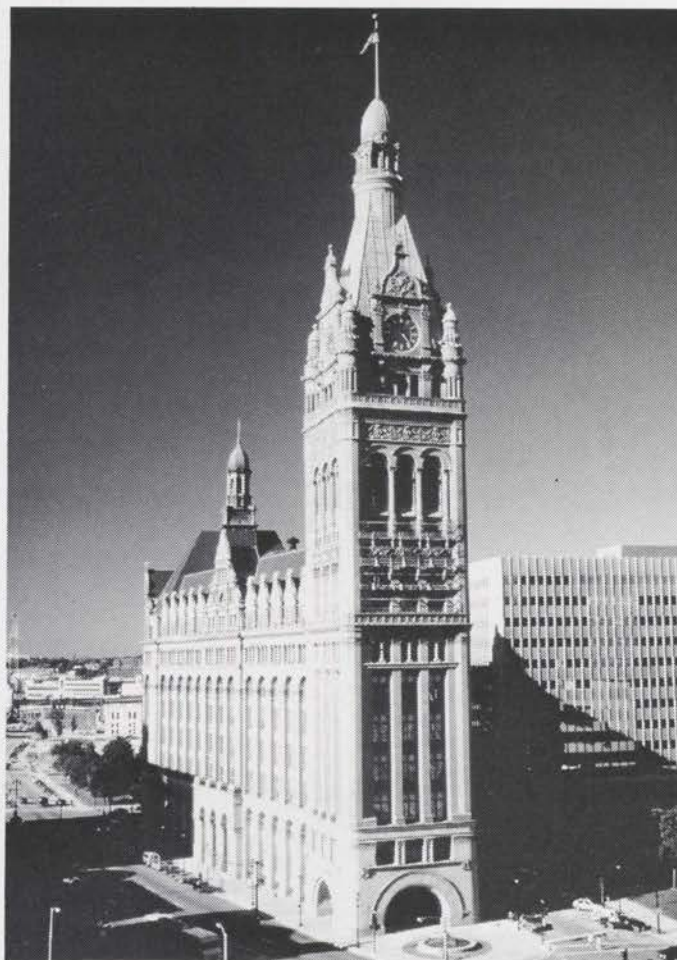


Downtown Milwaukee skyline — the new and the old.



The historic Plankinton Arcade in the Grand Avenue Mall.

At right: Milwaukee's impressive City Hall. Photo by Pallas Photo Labs, Inc.



While this invitation to join in MILWAUKEE FUN IN '91 the weekend of Friday, November 1 thru Sunday, November 3 did wait until DTOS was twenty-two, perhaps this is a case of better late than early! As you read this report we think you'll conclude that what we offer you today, both instruments and venues, is far more than we could have in the past.

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DTOS looks forward to sharing with our fellow ATOSers our unusual good fortune in having the combination of fine venues and organs in a fine city.

Milwaukee is an Old World city by any standard. Many of its Downtown buildings — from City Hall to Turner Hall, from the Germania Building to the Pabst Theatre — wouldn't look out of place in Munich or another continental center.

The influence is just a strong in the city's cultural life. Milwaukee is the home of some 50 ethnic groups, most, but by no means all, European. While the Downtown and Lakefront area is an interesting blend of the old and the new, the operative word is still "Gemutlichkeit" — good natured, easy-going geniality — something which we hope each guest will experience when we gather "by" Milwaukee for MILWAUKEE FUN IN '91!

The city is easy to reach by air (Northwest, our Convention Airline, has the most frequent flights), by AMTRAK and by Central Greyhound Lines. Frequent airport limo service is available at Mitchell Field to the Hyatt and other downtown hotels.

Convention Headquarters is the Hyatt Regency Milwaukee. In addition to fine accommodations and the ambience of its 18-story atrium, the Hyatt offers three lounges and three restaurants, including the Polaris revolving restaurant and lounge with a spectacular view of the city.

You'll want to make the ATOS Regional

Convention Desk at the Hyatt your first stop. There you will receive a hearty Badger welcome plus your Convention Packet containing your MILWAUKEE FUN IN '91 souvenir brochure, your name badge and information sheets . . . and, of course, the chance to ask questions, get directions, etc. The desk will be open from noon to 8:00 p.m. on Thursday, October 31 and from 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. on opening day, Friday, November 1. Incidentally, Milwaukee will be on Central Standard Time.

Milwaukee is one of a select handful of Midwest cities that boast a skywalk system. One can walk comfortably from the Hyatt Regency to fabulous shopping at the Grand Avenue Mall (including Marshall Field's and the Boston Store as anchor stores), to the Riverside Theatre and then even cross the Milwaukee River to the "East Side" without ever stepping outside.

AND, while the brand of beer "that made Milwaukee famous" is gone, the answer is "yes!" The question? "Do you still have breweries which conduct tours at the end of which they are anxious to have visitors sample their product FREE?" Miller and Pabst have the red carpet out! Of course, excellent restaurants also continue on the community's "menu" of attractions.

THE ORGANS AND VENUES



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*At right: The Avalon Theatre 3/27 Wurlitzer.
Below: The atmospheric Avalon Theatre.
Bottom: Avalon Theatre lobby. Jim Moy photos*



The Avalon Theatre 3/27 Wurlitzer

At one time there were five atmospheric theatres in Milwaukee. Today there is one — the Avalon, where the stars twinkled and the clouds floated across its sky for the first time on May 4, 1929. It had the distinction of being the first theatre in Milwaukee to open equipped to show the new synchronized sound pictures which had come on the scene in 1927. One of Milwaukee's most unusual movie houses, Architect Russell Barr Williamson designed it to appear to be a Mediterranean courtyard.

Opened with a 3/8 Wurlitzer "Special," in 1979 a rank was added. In recent years the organ has "grown" to 27 ranks with a French-style double bolster Wurlitzer console which allowed for much more unification and versatility. The original relay has been replaced by a solid-state Z-tronics relay.

The Avalon and its Wurlitzer have a very special place in the history of DTOS. Concerts have been held there since the early '70s, the pioneer days of DTOS, and it was under the aegis of Fred Hermes, owner of the organ (a DTOS founder and an ATOS charter member), that it has been augmented by a crew of hardworking DTOS members.

Today probably the most regularly used theatre organ in the Badger State, with pre-show mini-concerts every Saturday evening, the instrument has received accolades from many of the artists who have manned its bench over the years.

Cooley Auditorium 3/38 E.M. Skinner

The Cooley Auditorium, with seating for 1900, is located in the Milwaukee Area Technical College, Milwaukee's well known Voc-tech school. The organ is a 3/38 E.M. Skinner installed in 1931 at a cost of \$52,000. In 1982 it was decided to renovate the organ, and William Hansen, a fine organ technician, was commissioned to do the work. Bill also makes a very considerable contribution to the theatre organ scene with his continuing excellent work on the DTOS Riverside Wurlitzer and also the Grand Barton in the Civic Center in Madison in whose history DTOS has played an important part.

The lush orchestral sounds of the instrument were a trademark of the Skinner Organ Company in the late twenties. The Clarinet, Flugel Horn, English Horn, French Horn and Flute duplicate the sounds of the actual instruments so faithfully that it's difficult to realize you're listening to a pipe organ, not an actual orchestra.

The organ is also equipped with a roll player which is located backstage so the instrument could be used and enjoyed when an organist was not available. There are about 100 rolls in the library, some of which we will hear.

A pure Skinner — unchanged from the original design and voicing is a rarity today. The MATC organ is an outstanding example of Ernest M. Skinner's achievements in producing orchestral organs in the same era in which the theatre organ reached its zenith.



Cooley Auditorium E.M. Skinner.

MATC photo

THEATRE ORGAN



The restored Riverside Theatre with the Wurlitzer.

Larry Widen photo

The Riverside Theatre 3/14 Wurlitzer

It was truly a gala night for Milwaukee when the Riverside opened its doors on April 29, 1928. The public was impressed! Its decor which some say is based on French Baroque was designed by Kirchoff and Rose. A force in the Milwaukee architectural community of the 1920s, they also designed the Palace Theatre in New York City. The Riverside quickly became the showplace of Milwaukee. During the heydays of the 1930s and '40s it was a mecca, first for fans of vaudeville, then for fans of the big bands.

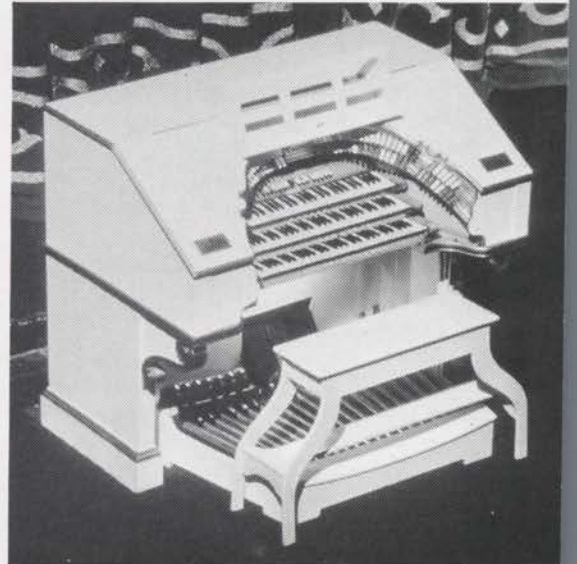
In the '50s it was a first run movie house. By the 1970s it had descended to the *Kung Fu* level, and on Labor Day 1982 it "went dark!" The theatre was not only dark, its prospects for a future looked black! Then in 1984 something close to a miracle occurred. The owners of the Riverside, Towne Realty, made a momentous decision — they would refurbish the theatre! After thousands of hours of work and a \$1.5 million investment, the theatre opened to a new era on November 2, 1984.

The 3/13 Wurlitzer 235 Special, which played on opening night 63 years ago, has had its ups and downs — and we don't mean those supplied by its lift — but it never left home! DTOS entered the Wurlitzer's life in the summer of 1980, negotiating an agreement to refurbish the faithful Wurlitzer.

Returning it to playable condition was a truly major project accomplished during

1980-81. In 1985 its specs were completely reworked, resulting in a more unified stoplist, and it also became a 3/14. In addition to the major organ project, DTOS members did much painting, relamping, etc., to make the Riverside auditorium and lobby a bit more presentable for concerts it held before and during the period the theatre was dark. Maybe, just maybe, those efforts helped motivate Towne Realty to the exciting renewal whose results you will enjoy, and to their donation of the Wurlitzer to DTOS in December 1986.

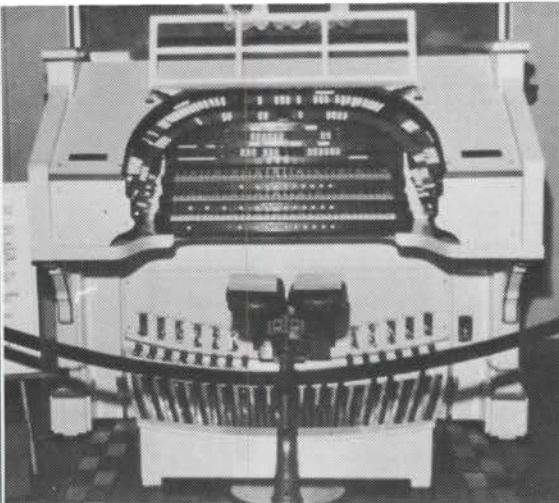
A more complete Riverside story, "Renaissance in Milwaukee" is found in the November-December 1986 THEATRE ORGAN.



Riverside Wurlitzer.

Larry Widen photo

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Oriental Kimball before installation. Glen Ehmert photo

The Oriental Theatre 3/30 Kimball

The Oriental made its entrance on the Milwaukee entertainment scene in July 1927 as the city's premiere movie "temple." Designed by the prominent local architects, Dick and Bauer, to seat 2,310 in what they described as "the most beautiful and artistic temple of Oriental art to be found anywhere in America," its cost was \$1,500,000. Included in the ornate plasterwork were 102 elephants plus many mythological creatures. The patron is prepared for what he will encounter in the "temple" by the large lobby with exotic decor bespeaking the Orient. The lighting control board was purported to be the equal of that in New York City's Roxy Theatre.

The Oriental was triplexed a few years ago but with amazingly little negative effect on the main auditorium, which has been effectively restored. Only the orchestra area under the balcony was used for the new "theatres"; the balcony and the rest of the orchestra remained intact, and the decor was carefully retained. At its opening the theatre was equipped with a 3/14 Barton, removed in 1959.

The instrument now in the Oriental came from downtown Milwaukee's Warner Theatre (later Centre, now Grand). This is a beautiful art deco Rapp and Rapp gem. Its 3/28 Kimball was "dispossessed" when the house was twinned in 1973. When and how it became the Barton's replacement is another story for another time.

The members of the Kimball Theatre Organ Society, which took title to the Kimball in 1979, merit the thanks and gratitude of theatre organ aficionados for the thousands of volunteer hours and the funds which have gone into a very thorough and comprehensive rebuild.

Plans call for its expansion to 38 ranks. We understand that it will have at least 30 ranks playing in November when we have the privilege of hearing its debut in its new home!



Milwaukee's Oriental Theatre.

Larry Widen photo

Gesu Church Kimball/Kilgen

The stately spires of Gesu have looked out over Milwaukee for nearly 100 years. The Jesuits laid the cornerstone of the church in 1893. Its Gothic architecture bears a resemblance to the Cathedral of Chartres in France. The massive monolithic columns between the nave and the aisles and those supporting the nave and transept give a sense of massiveness. This is countered by the airiness lent by the beautiful large stained glass windows which dominate the walls in the east and west transepts. This Gothic ambience together with wonderful acoustics provide a fine setting for the music of the pipe organ.

Gesu's historic organ, built by Kimball in the late 1800s, came to Gesu from Chicago in the early 1900s. It had approximately 50 ranks of pipes divided into four sections. In the mid 1950s the instrument was rebuilt and enlarged by Kilgen of St. Louis. Retaining a large percentage of the Kimball pipes, new windchests and a new console were among the installations. The pipes were augmented so there are now over 5000, comprising five separate divisions in the gallery and an echo division in the far right front of the church.

In recent years, Gesu Organist John Weissrock and Michigan organbuilder Jerroll Adams have collaborated in making considerable tonal and other refinements in the instrument, including installation of a new solid-state relay.



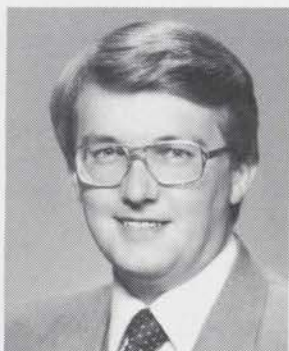
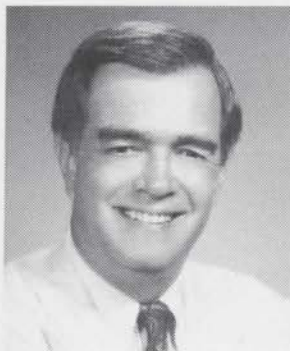
Gesu Church — looking toward organ in gallery.

Paul Trotter photo

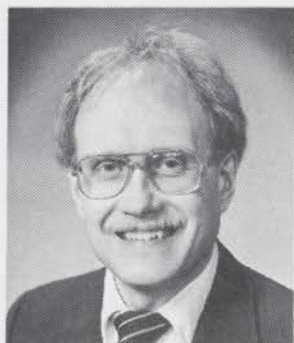
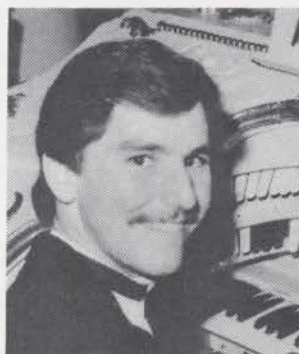
THEATRE ORGAN

AND NOW THE ARTISTS!

We are extremely pleased to announce that we will hear the following outstanding artists who will "come by Milwaukee" to put the organs through their paces:



Clockwise from top:
TOM HAZLETON, JONAS NORDWALL,
CLARK WILSON, DAVE WICKERHAM,
SIMON GLEDHILL, WALT STRONY,
and JOHN WEISSROCK.



All the above, we're proud to say, have played here before. As a matter of fact, Walt Strony and Clark Wilson were resident organists in Milwaukee for extended periods, and David Wickerham currently enjoys that position.

We're certain that all are well known to you with perhaps the exception of John Weissrock. John lives in Milwaukee and is a widely known and extremely talented classical organist. John tells us that he has also always had an interest in the world of the theatre organ. Among his theatre organ encounters, he remembers playing Vidor and Bach on the Moller at Milwaukee's one-time Pipe Organ Pizza. We'll introduce him briefly:

John received his training at the Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music. He entered college at the age of 16 and studied under Wayne Fisher, who was a student of Marcel Dupre. He has made ten recordings of organ and choral music which have received positive comment nationally.

He has also been associated with organ design and organ building for many years. A recent highlight in his career was a performance for more than 5000 people at the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris in the summer of 1988.

We will have the opportunity to hear John Weissrock at the console in Gesu Church on the Marquette University campus where he has been Organist/Director of Music for the past 13 years.

MILWAUKEE FUN IN '91 SCHEDULE

FRIDAY

Morning: Check-in and Registration

Afternoon: Tom Hazleton
Cooley Auditorium,
MATC

Evening: Jonas Nordwall
Avalon Theatre

Late

Evening Piper Jam Session
(Optional)

SATURDAY

Morning: Clark Wilson

Afternoon: David Wickerham
Riverside Theatre

Evening: Simon Gledhill
Riverside Theatre

Late

Evening: Piper Jam Session
(Optional)

SUNDAY

Morning: Tom Hazleton
Avalon Theatre

Afternoon: Walt Strony
Oriental Theatre

Evening: John Weissrock
Gesu Church (Optional)

(Schedule subject to change)

And in Conclusion . . .

Reviewing the convention schedule you can see that we've planned full days of enjoyment for you with exceptional organs, venues and artists . . . and to enjoy some of Milwaukee's many unique attractions "come early and/or stay late" is something to consider. In any event, do register soon. The members of DTOS look forward to greeting you at the Hyatt Convention Headquarters!



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