

# The Original Castro Organ

by Dave Schutt (with lots of help from Ron Downer)



*With the original relay removed from the theatre, a discussion ensues over the way to place it in the trailer.*

Ray Taylor and his remarkable family have a marvelous achievement in the widely acclaimed Wurlitzer organ in the Castro Theatre in San Francisco. It is beyond my imagination to perceive the amount of love and effort expended by Dick Taylor and Ed Stout to bring this organ to the pinnacle of perfection that we hear today.

However, that is not the organ this story is about. This is the story of the *original* Castro organ, a 2/11 Robert-Morton that was installed back in 1922, complete with a roll player, by Babe Jacobus, Warren Cordes and others.

At that time, the Castro was the newest in the Nasser brothers' theatre empire. They already had sizeable Robert-Mortons in their New Mission and New Fillmore theatres in San Francisco. Incidentally, the New Mission is still in operation and looks almost like it did when it was built in 1920. Its 3/14 was removed about 1963 by Bob Denny. The New Fillmore was razed in 1958 and esteemed San Francisco organman Charlie Hereshmann bought the 3/20 at that time. Although the Nasser brothers loved every aspect of their theatres and were reluctant to dispose of any part of them, Warren Nasser, who managed the Castro, decided that he probably would not be needing the organ and, in January 1962, sold it to me for \$1500 (plus \$60 sales tax).

I cannot recall exactly what I had intended to do with the organ. I was living in an apartment in Sacramento. Maybe I was looking for a reason to buy a house. In any case, I am fond of telling the story of how Ed Stout jokingly (I think) considers that my most significant contribution to the theatre organ world lies in the fact that I made the space available in the Castro Theatre for a *real* organ!

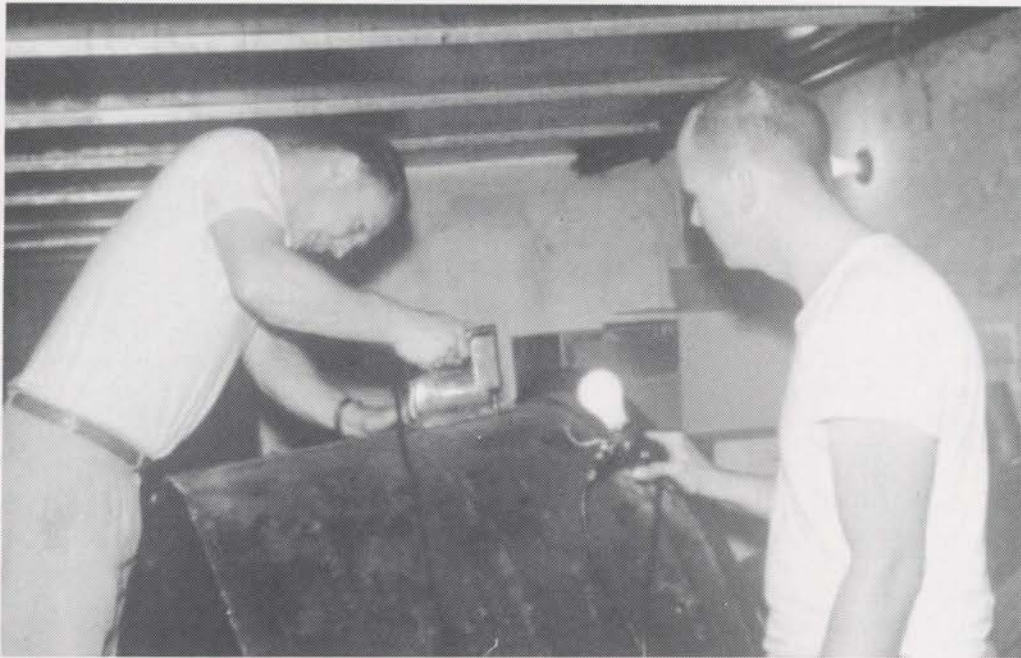
Ron Downer and I worked for what seemed to be endless weekends removing the organ. One reason it was such hard work was that there was a five-rank chest on the right holding a Flute, Clarinet and three strings, and another five-rank chest on the left for a Muted Horn (Tibia Clausa), Diapason, Tuba, Kinura and Oboe Horn. There was also a single rank Vox Humana chest on the left. The relay and switches were in the right chamber, and I remember that it was a nightmare untangling the bridge cable that went from the left to the right chamber. It must have been tied to every strut and support in the proscenium arch, and it snaked in and out of each one. We found it a very refreshing idea to use a large screwdriver to open the Pepsi machine in the lobby and to push a secret button inside and dispense its liquid delights.

Before Ron and I actually began to dismantle the organ, we wanted to see if it

would play. Word was that it hadn't been heard since Mel Hertz was organist there in 1935. We searched until we found the magnetic switch for the blower in the furnace room. It was certainly an old-fashioned apparatus; however, the blower started right up and ran exceptionally smoothly, but the generator was frozen. We got a car battery to supply the 12 volts dc. There were lots of dead notes, but the organ sounded amazingly good and a bit of playing brought many of the dead notes to life. There were quite a few smashed pipes in the Main chamber. I had particularly wanted to hear the giant Kinura with its funnel-shaped resonators; unfortunately, it only appeared on the Solo manual and did not work there. I recall that the Xylophone sounded unusually good. The bars had individual resonators, and there was a leather disc glued to each hammer. The acoustics in the Castro are very favorable to organ music, and it was quite a surprise to hear the organ after all those years. We were, however, anxious to get started, so we only played it for an hour or so. I wish we had recorded it and taken lots of pictures.

Most of our organ-removal work was done on weekends after the shows. I wonder sometimes how Ron and I found the energy to work all night, but perhaps being thirty years younger had something to do

## Caught in the Act . . .



*Ron Downer is forced to cut the blower housing to get it through a door. Theatre owners refused to allow the door to be removed.*

with it. I remember one night Ron was shocked to learn that I had removed all but two screws in the harp while he was taking a nap underneath it. I also remember the day we took out the blower, relay and switches. We couldn't get the blower room door open to the outside, so Ron cut the blower shell in half with a sabre saw and we carried the pieces up the basement stairs. In order to get the relay and switches out, we had to take all the braces off the stands that were holding up the backstage speaker cabinets. Believe me, we held our breath while we maneuvered the switch-stack between the unbraced legs of those stands. Fortunately, they held and the speakers didn't fall through the screen!

I stored the organ in a very dry building that master machinist Herman Werner had used for his welding shop in Oakland. Herman was the one who did a beautiful job of welding the blower shell back together. I borrowed a trailer to move parts to storage. The day I moved the blower pieces there was so much weight in the trailer that the axle bent and people were honking at me to stop and check it while I was crossing the Oakland-San Francisco-Bay Bridge. I unloaded a few of the heavier blower parts and hid them in the shrubbery on Treasure Island.

A few months after I had bought the organ, I learned that the Nasser brothers were storing its roll player in the Fillmore

Theatre. I think I paid \$300 for it. I knew the player existed because there had been a big vacuum pump for it in the blower room at the Castro. The player looks like an upright piano with the same Stickley oak case that Robert-Morton used on their Fotoplayers. However, it doesn't have any keys and has stoptabs that correspond to the original specifications of the organ. There is a double tracker-bar assembly so you can set up one roll while you are playing another one. It uses standard 88-note piano rolls.

Sadly, I never did install the organ after I bought my house in Sacramento. I was transferred to San Francisco and the house there was not large enough for a pipe organ. So I decided to sell the Castro organ.

A Southern Pacific locomotive engineer, Charlie Davis, wanted it and built a big music room for it in his back yard. In 1965 I traded it to Charlie for his Conn electric. Charlie and some of his friends installed it. He replaced some things that had been damaged in the theatre: the violins and the toy counter came from the Robert-Morton in the Lakeside Baptist Church in Oakland; the original Muted Horn was replaced with a Kimball Tibia Clausa for which I sold them a Carlsted single chest (from the Daly City Theatre) so it could be on its own tremelo. The Vox Humana and Chrysoglott were Wurlitzer. He added the Orchestral Oboe that Charlie Hersh-

mann had saved out of the ancient Robert-Morton that had been on seven inches of wind in the New Fillmore Theatre. Hershmann also revoiced a church Oboe for them which sounded a bit like an English Post Horn.

Charlie Davis bought a mahogany, three-manual Morton console from the Crest Theatre in Provo, Utah. Lee Smith, formerly of Fresno, bought the original oak, two-manual console from the Castro organ.

And as long as I am trying to recall about the organ, I want to complete the story about the blower. After Herman's wonderful welding job, Charlie Davis decided not to use the 7½ hp, three-phase blower. He sold it to Bob Reichert who used it for the organ in the State Theatre in Benecia. That organ was later moved to a pizza parlor in Groton, Connecticut. Charlie bought the five-horsepower blower that Bill Galt had been using on the organ in his home in Bakersfield. That blower's motor had been rewound to run on single-phase.

Perhaps, this story will lay to rest the questions about the original organ in the Castro Theatre.

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