

# Malco Theatre

## Wurlitzer 3/13

### IN

## MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

By Harlan Judkins

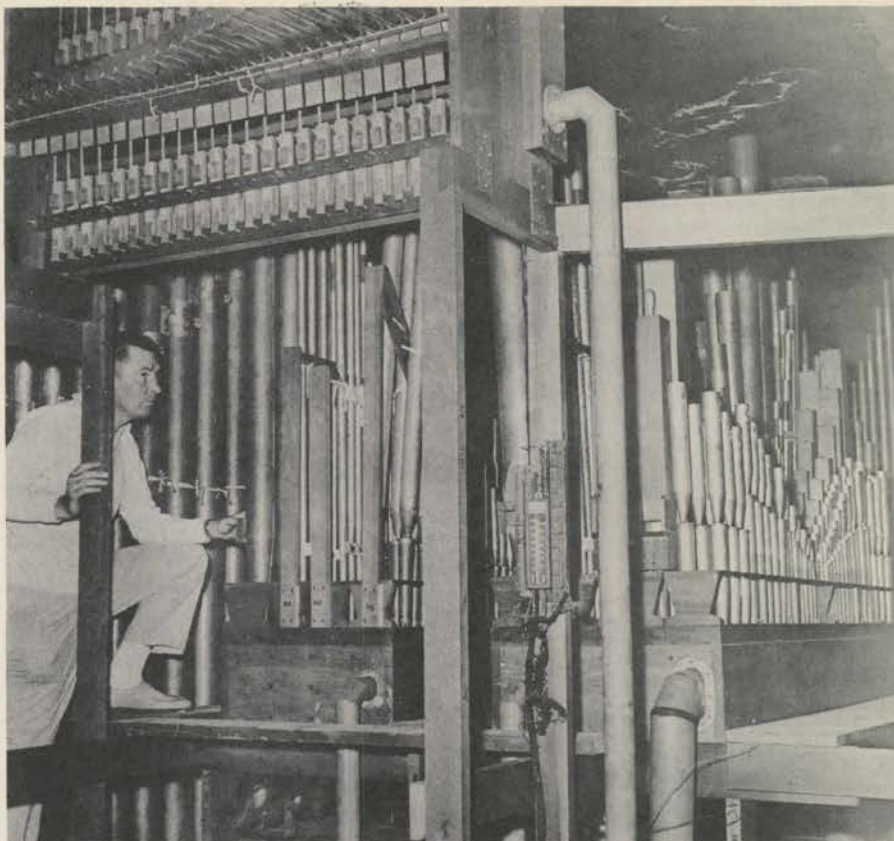
In the Malco Theatre located at Main and the famous Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee, is a Wurlitzer Theater Organ, designation Model 240. Wurlitzer's 240's were 3 manual 13 rank with brass trumpets and horn diapasons that distinguished them from the Model 235. This organ was installed in a new theatre building in the fall of 1928, a building which was built by a group of Memphis investors and leased by RKO Keith.

The theatre that originally stood on the site was built in the early 1900's and was destroyed by fire in the early 20's. The site was cleared and the auditorium in the new theatre building was planned for 3000 seats. At the time the plans were being drawn, the architects did not know the size of the organ being specified by the owners or RKO, so the chambers were constructed to take at least 26 ranks in 4 chambers, 2 chambers on each side.

Construction of the building was slow, and the organ arrived in Memphis before the theater was ready for installation. The organ was stored in an old warehouse near the railroad yards for a considerable time. Finally, the building was ready for the organ. The roof was not complete but it was decided to drop the chests and relay rack into the chambers to simplify the installation when the Wurlitzer technicians arrived. The building contractor did not consult anyone about the proper placement of the chests...so everything marked Solo went into the LEFT side and everything marked Main went into the RIGHT side. When the Wurlitzer men arrived, they found the roof on...pipe chests in respective chambers...but on the wrong side!

It was too late to change them without considerable difficulty. So today 33 years later, the organ is reversed from the standard installation, Solo on the left and Main on the right. The console was placed on the left side on an elevator. The organ is difficult to balance musically for the organist due to the Solo chamber being so near to the console. The top two chambers house the organ and the lower chamber on the left side contains the relay. The lower right chamber is empty.

The organ has survived some troubled



Harlan Judkins in Malco Wurlitzer Main Chamber. Note fire damage in roof (upper right).

moments. Some years back it was decided that a flat white paint would be more reflective to the spotlights than the Wurlitzer beige. A painter was engaged to do this job. He did it with a spray gun and completely covered the lower manual contacts with white enamel. It took a week to remove the paint from the contact plates...and there are still traces of the paint on the contacts.

Five years ago a short circuit in the stage lighting system caught the front curtain on fire. Before the fire department arrived the curtain had fallen to the stage and ignited the velvet cover over the organ. Luckily, it only smoldered until the fire department generously sprayed the console with water. Water damage to the inside of the console was light, but the wood surfaces were badly scorched and broken as the firemen opened the console in their usual way...with axes. But the keyboard was not hurt in any way.

The surface of the console has been refinished by sanding and a black enamel with gold trim has been applied. Also during the clean-up operations the fire department went into the chambers to double-check on the possibility of fire in the walls. They broke the ceiling of the right chamber open and a generous amount of plaster and dust filled the 16 foot Diapason pipes. Those have been cleaned and checked, and are back in operation.

Orpheum-Keith operated the theater

from its opening in 1928 until 1940, when the M. A. Lightman Company bought the property from the Memphis businessmen. The Malco organization has operated the theater since that time.

The opening night in 1928 was, as usual, a gala occasion. The "Giant Wurlitzer", as it was advertised, was reportedly played in its first concert by Jesse Crawford. Numerous other organists performed at the console at various times, most of them from Memphis and most still there. They include Art Hays, Fred Heck and others.

The name that is synonymous with the organ, however, is that of Milton Slosser. He started playing in 1925 and played last in 1946. His between-shows offerings are remembered by most Memphians and everywhere the organ is mentioned...the question is always asked...what happened to Milton Slosser? After he left Memphis, he played the Capitol Theater Wurlitzer in Washington, and died in 1958 in the nation's capitol.

After Slosser's departure the organ was more or less idle and rapidly fell into a state of disrepair. Bob Mac (Bob McCombs) was engaged for a short while in 1956 but he and the Malco gave up after two weeks. At every session the organ would give trouble. Bob tried to keep out the ciphers and worked steadily on the chests, but to no avail.

Harlan and Philip Judkins, brothers, have been organ fans for many years, dating from the 30's when Milton Slosser

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used to alternate 6 months in Memphis at the Malco and 6 months in Tulsa at the Ritz 24 rank Robert Morton. Being from Tulsa, Harlan and Philip worked on the Robert Morton together. After Harlan moved to Memphis in 1954 Phil continued to service the Ritz Robert Morton and soon learned to play it. After moving to Memphis, Phil and Harlan visited back and forth often and would play the Robert Morton when in Tulsa; when Phil visited in Memphis there was nothing to play so they investigated the Malco Theater.

Elton Holland, the manager, agreed to let them play the organ, but warned that it was in a bad state of repair. Turning the organ on for the first time brought a symphony of ciphers. It took an hour or so to clear the ciphers in order to play it. The session was a continuous process of scaling the chamber ladders with very little playing. After the session, they talked with Holland and then to Richard Lightman, the theater owner, and made arrangements to fix what they could. It was agreed, and this launched a project that has lasted 3 years and many to come. The arrangements was that Harlan would keep the organ in repair at no cost to the theater for the privilege of playing it.

Work was started..it was found that the ciphers and other troubles stemmed from coal soot. The soot had been blown into the chests..pipes..and all other air parts from the blower. The blower room is in the basement and its opening was into the furnace room. For many years the theater was heated by coal furnaces and the filter on the blower room and on the blower itself was saturated with coal dust. Soot had caked on the magnet caps to such an extent that they could not open and close properly. The first project was cleaning all magnet caps.

The next project was cleaning as many pipes and throats as they could. Filters were changed at the outset.

After the cleaning work had progressed, it was discovered that the organ had numerous dead magnets in every rank and throughout the console and traps. The relay rack was full of dead ones but the spreader was clean and worked perfectly. The Malco management had by this time given the brothers a completely free hand in the overhauling and wished them the best in their work. It was decided to rebuild the magnets and other parts that were not operating.

The organ by this time had regained some of the mellow tone and at least it could be played without continuous ciphers. Most of the dead magnets had breaks at the connection between the coils and the lead-in wire. Most of the breaks were caused by humidity and the tell-tale green spots would lead to the break. The magnets were repaired or rewound. This was a long and tedious job.

About this time, a mutual friend, Art Stovall, a pilot for Braniff Airways, gave the boys invaluable help. He became interested in the project and would help in Memphis, taking out bad magnets and replacing with rebuilds and then taking the bad magnets to Tulsa for Phil to work on. In fact, a regular parts airlift was going from week to week. Memphis to Tulsa and back to Memphis, Art and Harlan would do the organ work and Phil the parts repair in Tulsa. This arrangement went on for over a year. Slowly the work progressed.

To help keep the organ in playing condition with so many magnets out at a time, the second touch on the accompaniment manual was removed for spares..leaving all second touch couplers operating. Anytime there was a

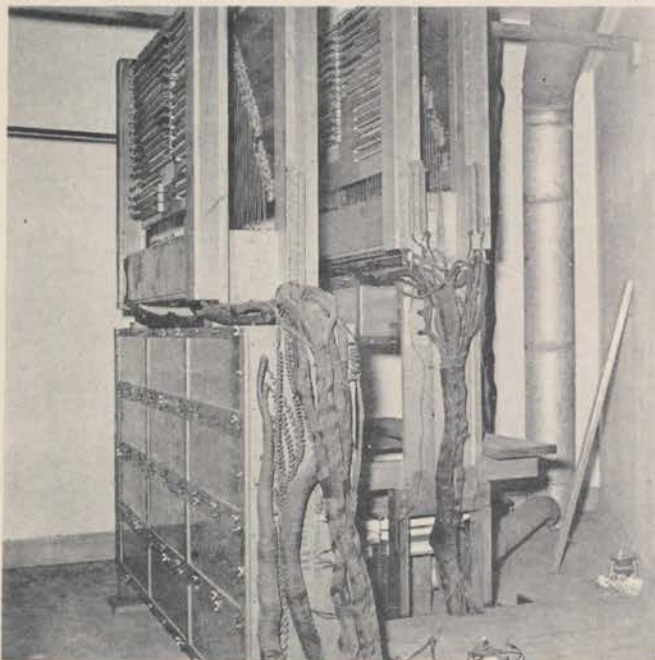
holiday all three, Harlan, Phil, and Art, would get together in Memphis to work on the organ. It was found in the process of work that the ole' bug-a-boo coal soot was as much a help as it had been a hindrance. The leathers are as good as the day they were put in. The coal soot contains an oily substance that has had a preservative action on the leathers..every leather in the organ was found to be in perfect condition. Coal soot is no longer a problem, nor will it be, for the theater was converted to gas heat in the early 40's.

By the fall of 1959 the organ was in good playing condition but with considerable work yet to do. The theater hired a young organist, Ernest Nichols from Clarksville, Tennessee. He was featured between shows and was an immediate success. He played from November 26, 1959 till January 4, 1960. The management reported that the organ more than paid its way. Nichols left for bigger pastures and the work continued.

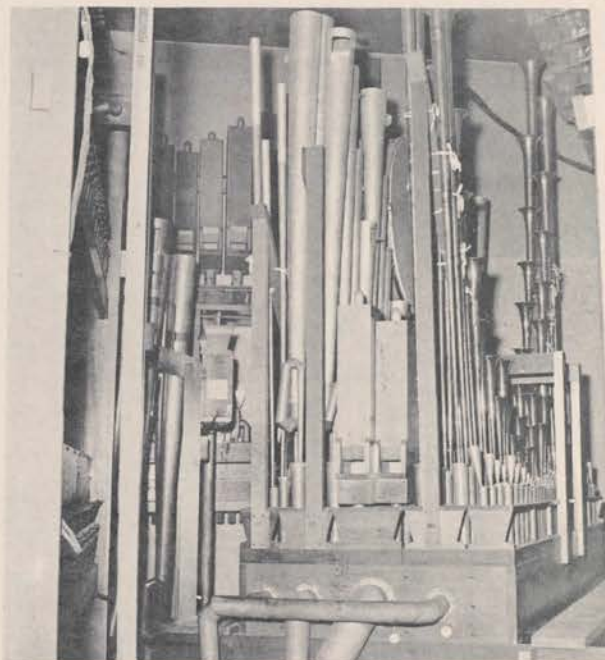
The management then advanced some money for new Reisner magnets. With the installation of the Reisners, the airlift was stopped. All magnets are now working, with the exception of a few in the traps and those will soon be replaced. The organ is tuned regularly in the spring and fall. There is some trouble keeping it in tune during cold months due to the heaters being burned out..but this coming winter this will be corrected.

The organ was missing two items..the snare drum and castanets. The drum was replaced with one from a Beale Street hock shop...cost 15 dollars. They have the castanets but have not yet made a sounding board for them. With new magnets..perfect leathers..and work

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Relays in Malco Wurlitzer



Solo Chamber in Malco Organ

\$5.00 - DUES ARE DUE FOR '62 - \$5.00



# RECORD REVIEWS

PIANO - PIPES AND POPS - TS-140  
Timbre Recordings, Seattle Washington

Eddie Clifford and Tubby Clark combine their talents to bring some of the finest pipe organ and grand piano music we have heard in quite some time in this, their latest effort.

The recording was made on the 4-manual Robert Morton in the Music Hall Theatre in Seattle, with Eddie Clifford at the console, while Tubby Clark plays the grand in a well balanced pick-up that lets you know that the organ is in a large theatre. Good engineering balance combines the piano and organ and

the artists prove that they have worked together as a team for over twenty years as their tempos never falter in what is certainly not the easiest of combinations to record in a large auditorium.

The numbers on this disc are all sure fire hits (standards to the trade) and include Best Things In Life Are Free, After You've Gone, Giannina Mia, When you're Smiling, Serenade from the Student Prince, Make Believe, and Schubert's Serenade, to mention but a few.

The cover notes tell us that Eddie Clifford has been a pipe organist since

1922 when he played for silent movies, while Tubby Clark started playing professionally in 1933. Listening to this disc will prove that here are two real musicians that know how to play the music that everyone likes to hear.

On the technical side: this TIMBRE Recording was made with an Ampex 601-2 stereo recorder. The piano was recorded with two American 330 microphones, and the organ was picked up with two Sony Condensor microphones.

A previous release featuring Clifford and Clark at the Baldwin electronic organ and Baldwin concert grand piano is also available for those liking piano-organ recordings. This one, titled "Clifford and Clark Play Requests", stems from their playing together as a team in the beautiful Marine Room of Seattle's Olympic Hotel since 1949, and features tunes most requested by their many fans.

## .. NEWS.. AND VIEWS

According to news just received from Astoria, Oregon the former Loew's Rochester 5/24 Marr & Colton...is now playing..for the patrons of Bill Blunk's Viking Roller Rink...A feature article on this mighty instrument...will appear in THEATRE ORGAN soon...organ used for the first time in new setting in October...Genial Bill Blunk invites all to visit...Those that can play are welcome to try their hand...There's an offer for ATOE members!...Thanks Bill!!! ...Erwin Young...UAL pilot was privileged to attend the Malco Theatre in Memphis...October 12th...when the 3/13 WurliTzer was used in conjunction with the regular show..Was very well received, says Erwin, who witnessed the show with Harlan Judkins...one of the men responsible...for the rehabilitation of this organ...See feature article in this issue...Two WurliTzers ( style

235) are for sale...says Harlan Judkins of Memphis...One in Loew's State, the other Loew's Palace...both in Memphis ...Asking price \$2500 each...Harlan says both are in good shape...Organ activity in SF...started November 4 with George Wright filling over 4,000 seats... at the Fabulous Fox ( WurliTzer 4/36) ...for a midnite concert...\$2.25 per seat...Paramount (WurliTzer 4/32) with Tom Hazelton...used to celebrate Theatre's anniversary...November 17 and 18...Gordon Kibbee at the Big Fox... Friday midnite, December 1...for members of the Northern California Chapter of ATOE...( See Chapter Reports)... Tiny James at the Big Fox...Saturday morning, December 2...for ABC TV 'Toys for Tots' show...with a host of TV personalities on the stage...The Paramount featured...Tom Hazelton at the organ...Friday night December 22...

for a concert starting at 10 PM until??? ...Now if the Oakland Paramount...will just get off the dime...but then we in the Bay Area haven't done too badly... with one exception...Voters turned down the Bond issue to buy the Big Fox... Now what's going to happen!!!!

### MALCO WURLITZER

( continued from page 7 )

progressing, the organ sounds like the WurliTzers of old.

The Malco now plans to put it back into regular operation as soon as an organist can be found. It will be used a number of times during the coming months for public performances. A Stereo tape is being planned in the near future featuring Jim McLin, a very skilled local organist who has helped in the repair. Since the project started McLin has kept the dust blown out in a very pleasurable way. The organ is played almost every day before showtime and it always gathers a group to listen.

Speaking for his brother Philip and Art Stovall, Harlan Judkins stated: "I would like to thank M.A. Lightman Jr., President of the Malco Company; Richard Lightman, vice president in charge of theater operations; Elton Holland, theater manager; and Watson Davis, publicity director, for their support...both financial and moral..in the restoration of this WurliTzer 3-13. Also I thank them for their confidence in three A.T.O.E. members!"

If any member of the ATOE plans to come through Memphis during his vacation he is welcome to see and play the organ. Just get in touch with Harlan at Radio and Television Station WREC.

### WHILE THEY LAST

The following issues of TIBIA magazine are available while the supply lasts at \$1.00 each: Volume II, Numbers 2, 3 and 4. Mail your request with remittance to ATOE, Box 248, Alameda, California.

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Published quarterly in London  
by The Theatre Organ Club  
(President: Robinson Cleaver)

**Annual Subscription \$1, Post Free**

**Subscription Agent for U.S.A.**

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