

SANDY MacPHERSON

... Organist - Friend of Millions

By Lloyd E. Klos

"Hello, Everyone! This is Sandy at the BBC Theater Organ."

How often have those words been beamed into hundreds of thousands of homes throughout the British Commonwealth of Nations! Although considered as one of the top theater organists of England, this man is not an Englishman by birth. He is Canadian-born Roderick Hallowell Macpherson, a musician of great talent who has had one of the most remarkable careers in theater organ annals. The rise of Sandy Macpherson to fame should be of considerable interest to all theater organ enthusiasts.

He was born on March 3, 1897, in Paris, Ontario, a little Canadian town. His father was manager of the local branch of the Canadian Bank of Commerce, and his mother was the daughter of the manager of another bank in town. With this proximity to the realm of high finance, one would be led to believe that the young boy would turn his thoughts to a career in this field. It is fortunate for the theater organ lover that subsequent events steered him from the path of banking to the road as a cinema organist.

Sandy began studying piano at about six, his mother instilling in him an early love of music. It was the custom in those days for Sandy's father to invite the young bank clerks into his home for Sunday afternoon tea. An hour or two of group singing, featuring religious songs and popular ballads with Mrs. Macpherson at the piano, was part of this custom. When he was nine, Sandy created a furor in Paris by absenting himself from home. He had been reading *Horatio Alger*, and was bound and determined to follow his hero's life. After a few hours of wandering about, he was returned to his home by the town's mill manager whom he had encountered.

In 1910, the family moved to Amherst, Nova Scotia, the father having been made manager of the bank in that city. It was here that Sandy began organ lessons in the First Baptist Church, and it was most intriguing to the lad, because of the wide range of expression and great interpretation possible on this instrument. He kept up his piano study as well, and at the age of 14, he received his first theater engagement.

The small picture house in Amherst seated 100. Admission was 5¢, and the pictures were single-reel features of 10 to 20 minutes' duration. The piano accompaniment was provided by a lady



"Hello everyone, this is Sandy . . ."

A characteristic photograph of Sandy Macpherson at the console of the B.B.C. Compton, taken at about the time of his appointment as resident organist in 1938.

whose ability at the keyboard was equaled by her ability with the gin bottle. When the theater manager heard Sandy's piano style, he hired him as a replacement for the lady each time she was "under the weather." It meant 35¢ to the young pianist for each performance.

For two years, Sandy was enrolled at the Amherst Academy. Later, he entered St. Andrew's College in Toronto. It was here that his musical education expanded. He continued studying the organ, and also became conductor of the school orchestra. After leaving the college, he returned to Amherst where it had been decided that he join the bank. He was a member of the staff only a few months when World War I broke out. In 1915, after a six-week course, Sandy was commissioned a lieutenant in the Army Service Corps. Lacking an assignment because of the slow-turning official wheels, he held various jobs in the meantime. He helped guard German prisoners-of-war, was a night watchman in a New Jersey factory, was a stock-keeper in a stationery firm, and worked in a lumber camp. With war's end, he decided that music was to be his forte, but before embarking seriously in this field, he had a brief career as a tobacco salesman. It was vigorous work, and took a lot out of him, travelling about.

Sandy enrolled in the Hamilton Conservatory of Music as a piano student. His instructor was W. H. Hewlett, principal of the Conservatory, and organist and choirmaster of the Centenary Methodist Church. While a student, Sandy helped his finance by selling pianos. One day, he visited the Temple Theater in Hamilton, and promptly recognized the pianist accompanying the films as an old friend. Since the musician was handling two jobs, he asked Sandy to fill in for him during the lunch period. The job meant \$5 a week. Trouble between the regular

pianist and the theater's musical director developed, and Sandy was appointed regular pianist. He gained valuable experience in this position, improvising by the hour-agitatos, hurrys, mysteriosos etc., and remained at the Temple for a year and a half while continuing his studies. Wishing to further himself, he moved to Hamilton's Lyric Theater, a vaudeville house on the Keith circuit.

Sandy fondly remembers his days at the Lyric. The leading variety artists of the time appeared there, among them Alice Lloyd, Chic Sale, and the Marx Brothers. In 1921, Macpherson moved to Hamilton's Loew's Theater, coming under the management of MGM. Appointment was secured through James J. Lindsay, musical director of Loew's Theaters Inc. Sandy had reached a milestone in his career. Heretofore, all positions were as pianist. This was his first as organist, and he hesitated before accepting. He had performed on a church organ, but the new job's better pay won him over. In time, he persuaded the theater manager to insert a film strip into the main reel, proclaiming "Special Musical Accompaniment by Hal Macpherson at the Organ!" Another big event for him in 1921-he was married.

While at Loew's Theater, he followed the elaborate scores for such pictures as "The Birth of a Nation", "Orphans of the Storm", "Scaramouche", "Monsieur Beaucaire", "The Covered Wagon", "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse", and "Ben Hur". These scores came neatly bound and bristling with cues. They consisted of excerpts from the classics and semi-classics, carefully edited, timed and written, complete with musical bridges, and all the organist had to do was to keep a sharp eye on the cues, and play the music according to the instructions. In comparing the music of the silents with

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the mood music of today's motion pictures, Sandy believes that the former had more appeal, because that music was used as a substitute for the action, whereas the latter merely establishes a mood.

He remained at Loew's Hamilton from 1921 to 1923, and his ambition began to make him restless. He made a trip to Buffalo, and was advised by the manager of a small theater near the railroad station to stop at Shea's Hippodrome, and try out for the organist post. This he did, playing for Mike Shea, whose name was "Mr. Big" in theater circles in the Buffalo area. Shea knew nothing about music, and relied upon his musical director for advice on talent. A short story confirms this. He and his musical director were present when an organist auditioned, then asked the director what he thought. "He's not quite up to the standard we want, he's a bit heavy on the pedals", said the director. "Oh", replied Shea, "You don't need to worry about that—I'm going to have those things ripped out, anyway!"

Sandy succeeded in getting the job at the Hippodrome, which at that time boasted the largest Wurlitzer in Buffalo, a 3M 19R instrument, installed in late 1922. (The organ is now reposing in the luxurious home of ATOE member Harold Logan, successful attorney in Niagara Falls, Ontario). Sandy tended to play with full organ, and that seemed to irk Mike Shea, as his native character was directly opposite. Give him "Londonderry Air" or "Come Back to Erin", and he was completely happy. Even so, Sandy remained at the Hippodrome for over a year. Next stop was Loew's State Theater in Buffalo, a cinema which featured an orchestra. It was here that Macpherson was first labelled "Sandy". One of the orchestra members noticed his sandy hair and complexion, started calling him "Sandy", and the nickname was stuck ever since.

The theater management retired the old organ, substituted a Moeller, and as a result, Sandy began solo programs. Here were the beginnings of his "organ personality". He had to experiment with his audiences, playing certain semi-classics some days, popular music other days. During this time, Macpherson became Director of the Theater Organ Division of the Elmwood School of Music in Buffalo. The President, R. M. George, saw that organs were being installed in most of the theaters in America, and the demand for good organists exceeded the supply. He fitted into his own studio a Link 2-manual organ, providing every stop an organist would find on a full-sized organ. A film projector was installed so that the student would be working under the same conditions he would find in a theater. The Link was manufactured by the same firm in Binghamton, N.Y., which made the Link Trainer in World War II. Sandy made friends with some well-known people

during the years in Buffalo. One was Jack Yellen, writer of Sophie Tucker's songs. Another was Harold Ramsay, a fellow organist playing the 4M 28R Wurlitzer in Shea's Buffalo Theater. Sandy and Harold had double and triple-decked sandwiches named after them in Buffalo restaurants, more evidence of his rising popularity.

In 1927, he sailed for a vacation in England. Armed with a letter of introduction to the European chief of the Wurlitzer Company in Paris, Walter Pearce, Sandy was introduced to Pearce's partner in London, Major S. J. Wright, who showed the organist the Wurlitzer installations—the Plaza, Finsbury Park Rink and others. The Empire Theater in Leicester Square was being built. Sandy was asked to stay, but the pay was not as good as in America. He returned to the States in October 1927 to resume his work in Buffalo's State Theater until May 1928, when the theater was closed.

He was not out of work long, because the Empire Theater in Syracuse, N.Y. was reopening, and he accepted the post of organist there. Re-opening night was a big event, with flowers, telegrams, well-wishing, excitement. After listing the distinguished guests of the evening, the local newspaper added, "The only other newcomer is Sandy Macpherson, the organist. He's a long, tall drink of water with personality". The heat and humidity were fierce, and at the completion of his recital, Sandy was thoroughly soaked with perspiration. The newspaper further stated, "He got 'em community-singing at the first attempt, patted the town and the house on the back a couple of times, and took a few bows on his own account to the loudest applause of the evening."

When he first appeared in Syracuse, Sandy was billed as a "hot organist", the Turkish Bath atmosphere of the theater notwithstanding. The audience thought it part of the act during one performance when smoke and flames emitted from the console. A short-circuit was the cause, and electricians hurriedly cut the power.

One day, Sandy received a cablegram from London. An organist with American experience was wanted for the opening of the new Empire Theater. Would he take a six-months' engagement? He did, and soon the Macphersons were off to London's West End.

The opening of the Empire on November 8, 1928, was a major event in British cinema history. The magnificence of the building was overwhelming. A black marble box office; the huge auditorium, seating 3,500, the largest in England; marble pools with goldfish; fountains of iced drinking water; and oak-paneled men's smoking room; ladies cosmetic rooms; rare antique furniture; feather bed-like carpets all added to a picture palace unequalled in Britain at the time.

The musical program was impressive. A 40-piece orchestra under Dou Albert from the Capitol Theater in New

York, plus the organ console, rose into view on an electric lift. Reginald Foort, organist in the New Gallery Theater in Regent Street, was brought in to accompany the pictures, and Sandy Macpherson provided the organ interludes.

The Empire Theater was indeed THE theater in London. The elite attended its offerings. Members of the foreign legations and embassies were frequent visitors. The Prince of Wales was often in attendance. Sandy had the problem of playing the right kind of music before the right kind of audience. Tuesday afternoons, for example, he could play Franck, Ravel, Beethoven, Handel, Brahms, and Bach, but on Saturdays, it was Gershwin and Berlin. Often he had to steer the "middle line" in his selections so that all listeners would be satisfied. In the autumn of 1929, the orchestra left the Empire, so Sandy was given the added job of accompanying the second feature. His organ interludes were steadily growing in popularity. He discovered that while the theater organ had a ten-year start in America, the Americans still preferred current music, whereas the English audiences desired the older melodies.

Sandy instituted new ideas in organ playing. He talked to himself over the microphone as he played, the people howling with laughter. He presented a routine entitled "Liszt, Chopin and Mendelssohn". Then, he hired a Duo-Art grand piano which would play pianola rolls featuring a Chopin Scherzo, Mendelssohn's "Bee's Wedding" and Liszt's transcription of the Quartet from "Rigoletto." Sandy would play the composition, while portraits of the three masters appeared on the screen. He would press a console button, and as the piano would rise on a lift, playing the three masters' works, Sandy would finger one manual of the organ with stop keys off—a mesmeric communication between piano and organ!

Jesse Crawford visited England in 1933, and played a four-week engagement on the Empire Organ while Sandy toured the Paramount circuit. Then Mac returned to the Empire, for 10 years, and during that span, met more famous show business folk—Eric Coates, Binnie Barnes, Charles Forsythe. The Empire Theater presented the first full-length American musical in England—"Broadway Melody." From 1936 to 1938, Sandy's popularity increased through frequent quest shots on the BBC organ, the programs emanating from St. George's Hall.

A regular series followed, the sponsor recording 15-minute programs in advance. On Sunday mornings, a recording van with all the necessary equipment and technicians would arrive at the Empire Theater stage door. At the same time Carroll Levis at the Odeon across the street was also recording.

In 1938, Reginald Foort left the BBC to take a 5M 27R Moller organ on tour. Sandy thought that aspirants for the

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JOE GIBBS SPRING

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Joe Gibbs Spring at the console of the Golden-Voiced Barton in the Orpheum Theatre, Springfield, during the opening in August, 1927.

by James Somath

Heaven was not a band of angels, pearly gates and beautiful clouds to Joe Gibbs Spring. It was a beautiful new 28:0 seat Orpheum Theatre in Springfield, Illinois in August of 1927. Heaven was coming up out of the pit on a brand spanking new 3 manual Barton pipe organ with a glorious burst of sound that would shame the celestial choir. Reams of publicity and pictures had flooded the local papers for days before the opening and a fine pit band and five choice acts of Orpheum circuit vaudeville was on the bill, but Joe and the organ were the featured attraction.

The talented youngster had with unerring instinct picked the great Arthur Gutow for a teacher and had absorbed his art with startling speed. Art, at the time was playing a 3/9 Kimball at the old Woodlawn Theatre in Chicago. As soon as Gutow felt that Joe Spring was qualified he landed him with the old theatre chain of Lubliner and Trinz. From this point Joe worked into the Orpheum organization and wound up as the headliner at the opening of the Springfield Orpheum. After a very successful season with the Orpheum Theatre, Joe Spring felt the pang of the displaced Chicagoan and went back to

preside at the Aragon Ballroom Wurlitzer for seven years.

Feeling a call to the Southwest, Joe and wife, Bayne, first settled in Albuquerque and then bought a radio station in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Successful in this endeavor, he bought out his competition and operated both stations for several years. Strangely enough, there was quite a bit of organ music on the air-waves from Santa Fe for the next few years.

Several years back Joe sold the radio stations and retired to Albuquerque. Tiring of the inactivity he accepted a job as staff engineer of KGGM Radio in Albuquerque and again started playing the organ several nights a week at the local Elks Club.

Joe and Bayne were married in 1927 shortly after signing the contract for the opening of the Orpheum and 37 years of marriage have drawn them closer together than ever. Very devoted, very happy and very much ORGANIZED!

The Springs are frequent visitors in the El Paso, Texas area where they are guests of John R. and Lela Thomas. During these visits Joe Gibbs Spring often demonstrates the old theatre organ techniques for the benefit of the El Paso Theatre Organ Clubbers on the Plaza's Mighty Wurlitzer

BBC post would be many, so he didn't apply for the job immediately. Then, contacting Foort, he was told to apply as "he had as much chance as anyone else". This he did, and after several auditions and interviews with BBC executives, was notified on November 20, 1938 that he was chosen to succeed Foort at the Compton organ in St. George's Hall, which was then the most famous theater organ in Europe. Night and day, it was used in broadcasts to Britain and her dominions overseas.

The 4M 20R Compton organ, the first organ in Britain to be designed specifically for broadcasting, had 260 stop tabs, 54 pistons, a grand piano, and a Compton Electrone. The console was on wheels, and the three pipe chambers were the percussion, main, and solo. The Electrone section produced, by electric means, all sounds produced by reeds and pipes. The sounds were amplified, and then emitted from a loudspeaker suspended from the ceiling.

Sandy's first broadcast on this organ was on November 22, 1938. Before this, he worked out a little melody in 4/4 time for his signature tune. Accepting the advice of a professional composer, he changed the tune to a 3/4 and the result was "I'll Play to You", the number which has been his theme ever since.

Not only was he playing regular broadcasts, but he was also accompanying stage shows. St. George's Hall was a beehive of musical activity. Concerts, operas, minstrels, tragedies, drama--all were presented there, and Sandy was a big part of much of it. This was to carry through until the summer of 1939 while war clouds gathered ominously. In August, the government ordered the BBC Variety Department to move to Bristol, the only personnel remaining were two or three producers and Sandy Macpherson. On September 3, Sandy played his first war-time program. Hundreds were to follow. Twenty-three organ programs were broadcast in the first week! One lady wrote the BBC, "I could be reconciled to an air raid, if in the course of it, a bomb would fall on Sandy Macpherson and his everlasting organ, preferably while he is playing his signature tune."

During a late evening air raid, Sandy had made his way to the shelter in pajamas, bathrobe and slippers. The all-clear was sounded 15 minutes prior to his broadcast, and since he had no time to change, dashed to the studio, and began playing in this unorthodox get-up. The slippers kept falling off, so he kicked them away, finishing the recital in bare feet!

Sandy's fan mail was becoming voluminous. One letter he received from a group of servicemen in Franch launched an idea for a long series of programs. These men, having access to a radio, had requested some numbers to

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