

# JOE GIBBS SPRING

SANDY MacPHERSON  
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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 France 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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be played for the folks back home. After official approval, the program "Sandy's Half-Hour" was launched in February 1940. At first, requests had to come from servicemen, but later that was altered to include requests from civilians for service personnel. After five programs, Sandy was getting 5,000 letters a week. The backlog of request letters totaled 40,000, and his staff had to be enlarged to reduce it. After three months, a program was inaugurated for Canada on the overseas service. Every fourth program was spoken in French in deference to the French-Canadian contingents in Quebec and the Maritime provinces. In each program, following Sandy's organ stint, 8 Canadian soldiers talked to the folks back home.

On August 24, 1940, a team of foreign correspondents worked with Sandy on a program beamed to America, and called "London After Dark". After Sandy opened the program on the BBC organ, the correspondents, spotted in various locations throughout the city, gave their wartime impressions. These men included Edward R. Murrow, Larry Leseur, Cecil Madden, Eric Sevareid and Gerry Willmot. Ed Murrow had grimly remarked prior to going on the air, that it would be apropos if an air raid should start during the program. And that is precisely what occurred! Throughout the show, the sirens wailed, anti-aircraft barked, bombs exploded. A perfect backdrop!

The bombing of London was intensified, and the authorities felt that St. George's Hall might be a coming target. Therefore, Sandy was ordered to Evesham where a Hammond electronic was installed. A week later, on September 24, 1940, incendiaries were dropped on St. George's Hall, and the 70-year structure, dry as tinder, went up in flames, the BBC organ with it.

At Evesham, Sandy's programs continued. His Canadian program "A Message From Sandy" was extended to 30 minutes. The electronic was seldom out of use, as some top British organists came by to perform while on their leaves from the services.

Just as Sandy was doing his bit for the war effort, the other British organists were doing theirs. Those in the Royal Air Force included Reginald Dixon, Al Bollington, Frederick Bayco, Horace Finch, Jack Dowle, John Madin, Duely Beaven, Stanley Tudor, and Lloyd Thomas. The Army claimed Frank Newman, Phil Park, Donald Thorne, Gerald Shaw, and Dudley Savage, while the Navy had John Howlett and Bobby Pagan.

In 1941, Reginald Foort offered his travelling organ to the BBC which it readily accepted. It was installed in the Grand Theater, Llandudno, and in April, it became the official BBC organ. In November 1941, the program "Sandy Calling the Middle East" was begun. This show was run differently. Sandy broadcast from theaters having

organs in the major cities of Britain, travel restrictions preventing the relatives of servicemen to come to London to appear on his program. Red Cross shows, special broadcasts, benefits—Sandy did them all. In one performance, he was supposed to do a tap dance. He practiced the rudiments, tried the dance later, and promptly fell into the drums in the pit! Never a dull moment for this versatile fellow!

In 1943, Sandy was asked to take over a program "Tom, Dick and Harry in Uniform". The MC, John Hilton, had just died. His program had been tremendously popular. This was a sort of Mr. Anthony-type affair which sought to solve the problems of servicemen and their dependents. With misgivings, Sandy took it over, but like all his previous programs, it became a great success.

With the war's end, the BBC sought to find a building large enough in London to house its big theater organ with the 2-ton console. After months of searching, Hoxton Chapel was selected. The John Compton Organ Company overhauled it, and installed the organ in its new location. Renamed the Jubilee Studio, the building appears from the outside as the last place in the world for broadcasting.

The organ, built and designed in America by Reginald Watson in cooperation with Reginald Foort, is thoroughly English in style. Foort toured about three years with this instrument, and needed 5 vans to transport it. It was installed in over 200 locations. After 20 years of touring and solid playing, the organ is still going strong, used an average of eight hours a day for broadcasts and rehearsals. According to those who have heard it in person or on tape, its voicing is exceedingly pungent and incisive, and the strings and reeds have a dry quality. In a small studio, the Post Horn really sings out! Within the last five years, the organ has undergone some modifications. For a time, the top manual was removed in favor of

the electronic "Clavioline". The top manual had been a coupler, having no relays of its own, but coupling other manuals to it at various pitches. The No. 1 Tibia was silenced, its stopkeys being wired to the Doppel Flute rank.

Sandy's new programs were "I'll Play to You", which was a travelling show; "From My Post-Bag"; and "At Your Request". Even though the war was over, the veteran organist was still going as strong as ever. He visited Canada and his home town in 1947, and what fond memories he had! Many of those who participated in his war-time soldier programs made themselves known. It was a grand reunion. He played some concerts and benefits while there.

Many homes in Britain during recent years have been tuned in regularly on Sunday mornings to Sandy Macpherson's "Chapel in the Valley", a small chapel in the country conjured by the organist from the sombre reality of Jubilee Chapel. Since Sandy first invited listeners on May 29, 1949 to "slip inside without disturbing the music", the mythical Mr. Drewett, village postmaster, plays the organ, and Mr. Edwards leads the singing of the hymns. The chapel has become a reality for many, and has continued in spirit the original purpose of the Jubilee Chapel. There have been several series of this program, each series separated by several months.

Sandy Macpherson's sign-off words are "Cheerio, everyone, goodbye and all the best". To this, the writer believes that every theater organ enthusiast, whether he be American, English, Canadian or Australian, would reply "All the best to Sandy Macpherson—a wonderful personality, great organist, a humanitarian, and truly a friend of millions."

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