

# It's Doomed To Silence!

by Sid Bordelon

"I'm afraid it's doomed to silence..." So was the verbal epitaph pronounced and prophesied on one of the liveliest, yet often all-but-forgotten attractions of yesteryear ... the magnificent Robert Morton Theatre Pipe Organ of the Paramount Theatre in Baton Rouge, Louisiana ... AND, this dismal statement was made all the more believable because it was uttered by Roy Gimbel, the very man who installed the instrument in the then Columbia Theatre in 1928 ... at the height of its demand!

But the prophecy was interpreted as a challenge by Donald May, Baton Rouge craftsman in the business of restoring and maintaining pipe organs. "It was five years ago, out of curiosity, that I inquired of local Paramount Theatre manager Tom Mitchell whether or not this 'house' had a theatre organ," May recalls.

"What a question," Mitchell muttered, but he shrugged his shoulders and said, "Let's look around and we'll see."

"After some searching outside we found the dirty, discarded, nearly destroyed console. Now useless, it had been laying in the rain and other elements outside in the theatre alley for 13 years!" May says.

"Disheartened, I quickly imagined that the rest of the instrument had gone the same way of destruction, or had been cannibalized or vandalized beyond the state of replacement or repair as so many others I'd seen.

"What a fantastic stroke of luck it was when Mr. Mitchell then showed me up to the two theatre lofts, where the instrumentation was installed ... Amazingly, I found it ... INTACT ... though grossly out of order due to years of lack of use!

"In spite of some water damage by a hurricane in the late 1930's, I was gratified over the general physical state of the 'guts' and attributed this fortunate discovery to the fact that the lofts were barely accessible (both in height and entering space) and this is probably why no one had been there for 25 years!

"I say 25 years because this organ was played last in 1935 when the Paramount was a popular vaudeville house," May elaborates.

"I then found out that this theatre



Donald May at the Morton console he rebuilt in the Paramount Theatre, Baton Rouge, La.

— Sid Bordelon Photo

organ was custom-designed and 'voiced' for this building alone by the Robert Morton Organ Co. of Van Nuys, California, and cost the grand sum of \$15,000 way back in 1928."

What did this buy? "This wonderful instrument has a set of 37-note Orchestra Bells that can ring continuously, a 49-note Chrysoglott, a 37-note Xylophone, Tibia, Vox Humana, Trumpet, a trap section that contains Bass and Snare (both muted and normal), Drums by Ludwig, Chimes by Deagan, Woodblock, Tamberine, Tom-Tom, Tympani, Castanets, Cymbals (crash and jazz), a Violin, and ... yes ... a Bird Call!" May proudly boasts.

"But what a sad scene ... dried leather cracked and split, pipes clogged with the dust of time and all totally inoperative since the disarrayed contact points and wires no longer were able to carry a current to any intended instrument," May reflects.

So began a five-year task requiring nearly 3,000 working hours of combining musical talent, technical imagination and dedication toward restoring and modifying the Morton masterpiece!

After four years of painstaking inspecting, identifying and repairing, May found another dedicated theatre pipe organ lover in Robert Courtney, an organist by hobby.

"We stumbled upon each other last year when Bob inquired of Mr. Mitchell about the possibility of the pres-

ence of a theatre organ in the Paramount, since he had belonged to the Detroit Theatre Organ Club while a student at the University of Michigan."

"I became interested in theatre pipe organs while ushering part-time in a Birmingham, Michigan theatre that had one. I started organ lessons in high school and they let me practice on the one in the theatre," Bob said.

"Interest developed into fascination with this marvelous type of instrument, so when I found out that Don was involved in this project I decided to help him in any way I could."

With his volunteer aide, May set up a system of theatre intercommunications to cope with the difficult job of sorting, identifying and tagging the 24 miles of wires with 5,500 electrical contacts that connect the console with the overhead chambers! Things were beginning to take shape!

"Because of the simultaneous rebuilding in my garage of a console from another theatre pipe organ from an old Clarksdale, Mississippi theatre that took two years to find, the lengthy job has been greatly shortened," May emphasizes.

As the methodical task of rebuilding console and instrumentation took place, several innovations were introduced into this once 'ordinary' two-manual, six-rank theatre organ. They include: toe pistons for fast trap transfer, pre-selector instrument dials to take fuller



## IT'S DOOMED . . .

advantage of the first and second-touch controls, a special 3-hp motor/blower that delivers 4,500 cu. ft. of air per minute, and as May point out, "ordinary generators are not the most reliable, so we've also added a voltage regulated silicone diode rectifier to boost the power supply to 50 amps/15 volts to handle the extra circuits installed to enhance the organ's versatility."

Even electric heaters thermostatically controlled have been installed in the instrument lofts to maintain between 72 to 75 degrees range for longevity of its Middle A, 440-cycle tuning!

"Only recently was the 1,200-pound rebuilt console installed in the theatre and connected to the instrumentation ... what a wonderful experience," May excitedly reports, when we found that its split-second electro-pneumatic key and stop action is faster than its bass pipes can 'speak.'

"I've always felt that this instrument possessed wonderful design and such a result and rapid response is most gratifying after all this time."

For Donald May, a 27-year-old Baton Rougean who maintains four church organ contracts in addition to being a Dictaphone Corp. representative, the completed task is a realization of a five-year technical labor of love and resourceful imagination!

Proof of his Jobian patience and final success has now passed to hobby organist Courtney, who at 22 is an electrical engineer for the Humble Oil & Refining Co. in Baton Rouge.

Bob began playing selections before movie time and at intermission during certain local movie engagements ... the first of which, as you might imagine, was ... "THE SOUND OF MUSIC."

Truly, if you ever want thrilling personal proof of a 'prophecy of doom' failure, stop at the Paramount ... and LISTEN!



Don May (leaning on drum) and Robert Courtney in one chamber of the Baton Rouge Morton.

— Photo by Sid Bordelon



Courtney and May shown in the process of rebuilding the battered console which was found in an alley behind the theatre.

— Sid Bordelon Photo

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## SORRY ABOUT THAT!

Our humble apologies to the South. In the final installment of the Moller Organ Listing some damyankee stole "Big Mo" from the Fox, Atlanta, and moved it to San Francisco.

We hereby move it back. The correct listing is as follows:

# 5497 San Francisco, California — Fox/Capitol Theatre — 3-75  
# 5566 ATLANTA, GEORGIA — FOX THEATRE — 4-430

Apparently Opus # 5497 was the lobby organ at the San Francisco Fox, although Moller's list says Capitol Theatre.