

# Don Simmons Proves "Rink Music" Can Also Be "Listening Music" At Oaks Amusement Park 4-18 Wurlitzer

Sunday dawned somewhat late for the conventioners who were still reeling from the double feature at the Oriental the night before, Millie Alexander and Scott Gillespie. But by roughly 10:30 all breakfasts had been downed and the Heathman grille was accommodating a few later risers. Presently two huge busses rolled up to the hotel door and conventioners piled aboard, filling both to overflowing. The crowd was in a holiday mood and this conditioned was catalyzed by the presence of Angeleno Katy Lynch in the rearmost vehicle. Anywhere that Katy is will surely bust out into song, dancing and entertainment. She was spurred on by some goof\* in a loud, vulgar sport shirt who tooted snake charmer music on what looked like an elongated sweet potato. Katy, balancing precariously in the aisle of the swaying bus, stopped just short of a Minsky "bump". Thus, the relatively long ride to the Oaks Amusement Park passed quickly.



Don Simmons at the Oaks Park 4/18 Wurlitzer. (Del Matthews Photo)



ORGAN 'SAWBONES' -- Ken Wuepper (Saginaw, Mich.), sometimes known as 'Physician to the King of Instruments', finds the Oaks Rink 4/18 in good health. (Stu Green Photo)

The park is a typical amusement area with rides, booths, whirled sugar cones, pink lemonade (now in pop-top cans) and all the ballyhoo required to put customers in a holiday spirit. The rink itself is located in a well kept building ominously close to a river which floods occasionally. To prevent flood damage the owners have wisely installed the organ on a platform suspended from the roof, far out of reach of the highest possible water level. The platform is in the center of the rink and the pipework is unenclosed. As interesting sidelight on the "flood proofing" of the rink is in the floor itself. The polished surface is mounted on an enormous raft just as large as the rink. Thus, when the water rises the raft rises with it. On some occasions the water has brought the

floor up high enough for a man standing beneath the pipe platform to reach up and touch it, although it is normally some 18 feet above floor level.

At 11:20 MC Ben Hall stepped to the microphone in the little console booth at one side of the skating floor and introduced Don Simmons. Don greeted the crowd, which was seated on folding chairs set up near the console, ensconced in the bleachers lining the wall from which skaters normally watch other skaters while resting, or just wandering around the huge expanse of mirror-like floor.

Don's first selection, "Runnin' Wild," proved that it didn't matter from where one listened; the organ sounds great anyplace in the house. The jingly, well played opener was revealing also in another way; the rink has overcome the reverb problem often encountered in such huge halls. Absorbent material had been applied in just the right amount to prevent the music from running together but not enough to stifle its brilliance.

The 4-18 Wurlitzer is a beloved one to Portlanders. Some remember when legendary Oliver Wallace played it back in the '20s in its home until 1955, the Portland Broadway theatre. It has been installed intact except for the swell shutters and the exposed pipework is a

never-ending source of amazement to the local skating enthusiasts and those who come just to listen.

And come they do because Don Simmons music is far removed from what is generally considered "rink music." The impression is rather widespread that skating rink music is something far removed from listening music, probably due to the demand for exact tempo. In the East and Midwest the emphasis is put on the beat with as much embellishment from traps and percussions as the ingenuity of the organist will permit. Many rinks use recordings of organ music played in this fashion and find that it serves the purpose very well.

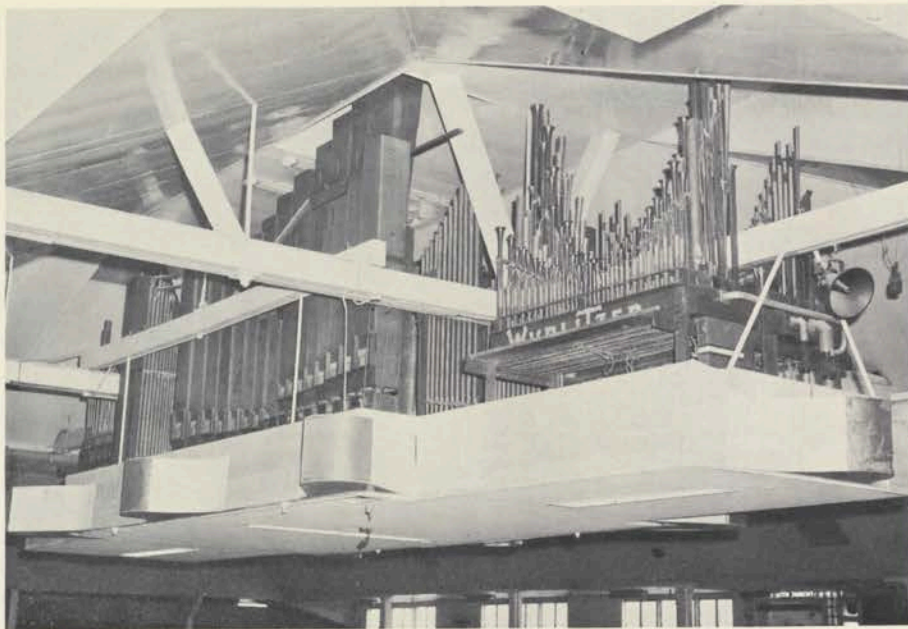
However, Don Simmons is representative of the "Northwest style" of rink playing; he has succeeded in maintaining the beat for the skaters while keeping the purely musical values at such a high level that those who come just to listen can enjoy the results just as organ music.

From the first it was quite clear that Don loves his work. While he plays he sways in time with his own music, changing combinations by hand continuously while enjoying the rich sounds he makes. He is able to add a "beat

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theatre organ - bombarde





The exposed pipework virtually hangs from the ceiling of the Oak Parks Roller Rink in Portland (Del Matthews Photo)

with heart" to such ballads as "When Your Lover Has Gone" with good effect. His "fillers" between phrases of music are original and he rarely repeats one once it has been heard. His instrument, despite the absence of swell controls, never sounds harsh or in any way unmusical. Many ATOERs mainlined the full volume of the instrument by standing directly beneath the overhead platform. It was loud there but never overpowering.



ORGAN OWNERS -- Lorin Whitney (Glendale, Calif.) and Bill Brown (Phoenix, Ariz.) soak up the Simmons style while Rey Galbraith (Pittsburgh, Penn.) doesn't seem to have made up his mind. (Stu Green Photo)

Don Simmons' arrangements are distinctive and unsimilar. He conjures up a realistic marching band for "76 Trombones" with full brass, fifes and drums

and a few minutes later its a Dixieland group liltting through "Up a Laxy River" in solid New Orleans style. Still later it was a more modern style of jazz for "Java" while "You'll Never Walk Alone" came through big and majestic but never "churchie."

One of his later tunes, "Sweet Georgia Brown," brought forth a wealth of improvisation in jazz.

While Don was playing rink snack bar was going full blast. Business was great because the coffee and pastry were free to conventioneers, courtesy of the host Chapter, bless 'em all. But few lingered longer than the moment required to pick up refreshments. The show going on out on the floor was too good to miss.

The concert was over much too soon but the rink had to be cleared for the opening of business. The ATOERs climbed aboard the two busses and were spirited away to the Bill Blunk studio for the next event. Actually there were two sets of busses going all the time with destinations staggered in order to accommodate the hundreds of ATOERs in reasonable numbers.

Enroute to the next event one could hear passengers humming or whistling snatches of the tunes Don Simmons had played. For the benefit of those who would like a record of many of the tunes Don played, it's available. Check the Record Review columns of recent BOMBARDES for purchasing information.

- Hal Steiner

\* Later identified as the BOMBARDE editor.

## FROM PALACES TO POPCORN PARLOR

By Ben M. Hall - Author of BEST REMAINING SEATS

This program was another innovation in Annual Meeting planning and it hit the mark with all who attended, which was virtually every ATOE member in Portland at the time.

Ben started the lecture by reading theatre advertising from the Portland, OREGONIAN, listing the pictures playing, a number of them featuring organists, then the date was given from the paper masthead. It was 1931.

Mr. Hall then requested that house lights be dimmed. A movie appeared on the screen showing some of the most famous movie palaces ever to be built in the United States including Roxy's and William Fox's famous big five. Scenes of the wrecking of Roxy's and the San Francisco Fox were shown along with commentary by David Brinkley and pipe organ music which featured the Merriken Wurlitzer in Silver Springs, Md. This film was a David Brinkley Journal, T.V. film which was shown on national network in 1962.



Ben Hall telling the capacity audience in Portland State College Auditorium about many theatres and their organs. (Del Matthews Photo)

At the finish of the film presentation, Ben started showing slides of many examples of movie theatres of the 1920's and explained the features of each that would identify the architect. His commentary also revealed the present status of the building, if still in use as a theatre, and the date of destruction, if gone.

The slide lecture was conducted on an informal basis with Hall's excellent

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