

SAN FRANCISCO'S AVENUE THEATRE PRESENTS TOP ORGANIST "ROUNDUP"

by ELMER FUBB

Seven Stars Perform at Wurlitzer for Sunday Afternoon 'Kickoff' Concert

San Francisco, Feb. 12—The Avenue theatre here is something very special. For one thing it's the culmination of a dream—a dream which coincides with the longings of organ hobbyists everywhere: a place where silent film master-works may be enjoyed to the accompaniment of a fine theatre pipe organ.

Fruition of the dream stemmed from the joint effort of two unlikely partners, hardheaded businessman (lithography) Vernon Gregory and volatile Edward Stout, whose expert touch in the more sensitive areas of pipe organ mechanics is well established.

If this pair seems ill-matched to bring about the miracle of a showplace from the '20s, it should be remembered that they share an uncommon enthusiasm for the organ, the theatre and the silent film—enough to stake fortune and futures in the recreation of a page from the past.

This concert was by way of introduction to Bay Area enthusiasts that the Avenue theatre is already a going concern with a program of weekend silent films to be



The console was originally in the State Lake theatre, Chicago.

seen, a fine fifteen rank Wurlitzer to be heard and an auditorium available for organ club meetings during non-movie periods. Therefore, we'll skip the background on how the project was conceived and grew (that's another story) and deal with the events of Feb. 12th.

Although the original plan was to present just four top organists in concert, it had to be abandoned when nearly twice that number stepped forward. It then became the "Cavalcade of Organ Greats", as Tabs 'n Drawbars dubbed it. It should be made clear that all artists donated their services to give the project a well-deserved send-off.

Shortly after the appointed hour (2:30

PM), house manager Jim Murray stepped to the microphone on the stage and introduced the MC of the day, handsome Gene Pofert, who lost no time ushering in the first of seven top-rank organists to be heard.

Tom Hazelton had a distinct advantage in that he is the house organist with more hours at the 3-manual console than any of those to follow. As Tom plunged into *The Girl from Ipanema*, the big curtain opened to reveal the screen, back of which could be seen the swell shutters opening and closing and the vague outlines of pipe-work played upon by work lights in the stage-based chambers. The lush Wurlitzer sound blended with Tom's easy-going style during *Bidin' My Time*, a George Shearing arrangement of the Gershwin tune. Tom's MCing is a pleasure to witness; his boyish friendliness complements his immense competence at the organ. "We're going to play the hell out of this organ today" stated Tom and his final contribution of the afternoon bore out his threat. One must be in love to fully feel the impact of *Liebeshodt* (literally "love death") from Wagner's opera, *Tristan and Isolde*. In it the composer represents in music the lyric passion which the lovers never enjoyed in life; they sense its magic only as life is slipping away—the slowly rising emotions carried in the Strings, the ebb and flow of the developing theme and finally the mighty pulse of the impassioned finale.

The afternoon was still young and Tom Hazleton had already created a musical moment that would be remembered.

Always popular Everett Nourse, with years of staffing at the late lamented Fox 4-36 Wurlitzer to recommend him, got off to a good start with a bouncy *Who?* and followed with a subtle ballad treatment of *When Did You Leave Heaven?*; *Anniversary Song* was played as a fast waltz with a Tuba lead and descending chromatic embellishment. Everett closed with a

weirdo version of *Limehouse Blues* which made something of an oriental mystery of the "story of old Chinatown." Everett enjoyed an enthusiastic round of applause, a not uncommon occurrence during the afternoon and mention of which we'll dispense with at this point as needless repetition.

Next on the bill-of-fare was ex-ATOE Prexy Tiny James, recording and concert artist, whose big round moving style is dearly reminiscent of the sound so often heard in theatres during the "golden era." Tiny milked the Tibia during *Does Your Heart Beat for Me?* (with Chrysoglott punctuation), then bounced into *Your*



SHADES OF PIZZERY. Bill Langford does a Harp arpeggio while giving the pedals a rest. The feet in the foreground are real. Photo by Bob Churchill

Heart Belongs to Somebody Else. Tiny's closer was *Baby Where Can You Be?* with a baritone Tuba lead and sizzle-String harmony.

Bill Langford is famed for serving up pretty music as an accompaniment to the Consumption of pizza in that Hayward dough dispensary known as the "Pizza Joynt." Bill is well schooled in the use of pipes (he plays a 3-12 mostly Wurlitzer nightly) and he also shows considerable talent in the wit department. Sample: "I don't know why I'm so shaky—oops!—that's a bad word?" (For the benefit of the unknowing, "Shakey's" is the name of a competing pizzeria.) Bill's opener was a slow, emotion-packed ballad entitled *I'd Give a Million Tomorrows for Just One Yesterday* in tempo rubato, and followed it with an upbeat *Brazil*. As a novelty he compared Jerome Kern's *Yesterdays* (from *Roberta*) with the Beatles more recent *Yesterday* and discovered that they were closely related. So far Bill had avoided playing in what he calls "pizza style" but he broke down and gave out with a vo-do-deo-dough version of *Some of These Days* in a tempo to pace the munching maws of the pasta pilgrims who frequent Henningsen's hearth.

Larry Vannucci opened with a grotesque *Winchester Cathedral* which alternated be-

tween the croaking "bee in a bottle" range of the Kinura and the "whistling" range of the Tibia. It was a triumph of arranging and registration over lack of material, and the audience loved it. But the real Vannucci art shone brightly throughout *The Shadow of Your Smile*



"THE VANOOCHI!" Larry Vannucci waits for the crowd to simmer down after his grotesque 'Wind-chester Cathedral'.

and the theme from the film, *A Man and a Woman*. When Larry announced *As Long as She Needs Me* with that "gone" look on his craggy visage, no one present could possibly doubt who he was playing it for; Claire was sitting directly behind the console, radiant as always.

Larry's "feature selection" was a finely registered *Blusette* which made good use of the organ's Brass Trumpet, Tibia, Clarinet, Kinura and Chrysoglott Harp.

The next artist was straight out of silent movies—wonderful Alice Blue. Alice is more than a personality, she's a character, and a top-flight entertainer. She made frequent comments about what she was up to over the PA system and generally made light of her efforts. However,



Facing a phalanx of soles, Alice Blue turns on the charm while introducing her next tune.

as a measure of her abilities, she selected Rimsky-Korsakoff's *Hymn To The Sun* for her initial selection, and did it proud. Next came a "Blues Hodgepodge" as she called it, a potpourri featuring bits and pieces of many tunes, most of them dealing with the continual war she wages against the Russian River which she in-

sists has evil designs on her Guerneville home, dog ("Faux Pas"), Volkswagen and herself—such damp items as *River Stay Away From My Door*. At one point she took off on what sounded like a silent movie chase. And leave it to the old showman to save a gasp for the very end; as she took her bow she stepped off the organ platform into thin air—and very nearly took a dive into the nether regions of the pit. A huge gasp went up from the listeners but Alice reappeared in the spotlight and indicated that nothing more than her dignity had suffered. With a happy wave she was gone, one of the most beloved and most interesting of the old-timers.

Alice Blue is hard to follow at any time and with the drama of her near "dive" still fluttering in the audience, she was doubly difficult to follow. It takes talent like that of Emory Stevenson to cope with such a situation and it just happened that Emory was scheduled next, the final act in an afternoon of wonderful musical adventures. Meanwhile the show had run far beyond the estimated time and six PM was looming. So, Emory cut it short with an able version of *Manhattan*, *Put Your Dreams Away*, and a Crawford-like *She's Funny That Way*. His encore was a delicious *It Happened in Monterey*. There the show ended.

Gene Pofelr, who had performed ably as the MC, bid the audience goodbye and invited all to return as soon as possible. Actually, there had been no "hard-sell" during the entire afternoon. Several times Messrs. Gregory and Stout had stepped to the stage to provide some history of the



THIS IS MY GOOD SIDE! Ed Stout and Vern Gregory clown for the multitudes. The Avenue is their dream come true.

project and to make themselves known to the audience. Stout gave a brief talk on organ "bird whistles" and demonstrated some special ones which will become a part of the organ, notably the raucous "Albatross call." Gregory turned out to be a comedian, mugging for the photographer who kept shooting Vern's "bad side," much to the Gregorian discomfolt.

In all it was an afternoon that won't soon be forgotten in Bay Area organ circles. Where else could you be served free intermission coffee by a couple of dolls like organists Lee Lees and June Melen- dy?

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For the benefit of those contemplating a visit to San Francisco, the Avenue theatre is located at 2650 San Bruno Street (take the Silver Avenue turn-off from Route 101).

BOB RALSTON POPULAR ON PIPES

by G. BANDINI

California music lovers were recently treated to four days of delightful theatre pipe organ music at the Carl Greer Inn in Sacramento, played by Bob Ralston of the Lawrence Welk organization. Although featured on a "plug in" on the Welk show as well as during personal appearances, he did a creditable performance on pipes. This was appreciated, particularly, by those familiar with the complex Morton multiple stop key, 4-manual configuration. Ralston worked up pleasing combinations and was well in control of the 4-16 Morton. During certain numbers, obviously Welk type arrangements, "champagne" bubbles floated out of the organ. Welk's borrowed bubble machine, with a control on the console, produced the effect. Although he is a very accomplished pianist and organist, he demonstrated showmanship versatility through conversational patter and a form of gymnastics. The gymnastics consisted of laying on his back, crossing his arms with his head un-

der the console and playing *12th Street Rag* on the Accompaniment manual!



HOWDY, FOLKS — I'M BOB RALSTON. —Encompassed by the giant maw of the Morton, and surrounded by eaters, Bob announces requests. (Photo by Bob Churchill).