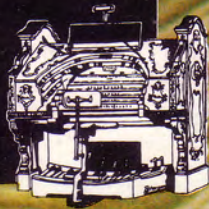


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CINCINNATI'S ALBEE-EMERY WURLITZER

by Michael A. Detroy

Christmas Eve, 1927, saw the opening of Cincinnati's largest and most elaborate movie palace, the RKO Albee Theatre. One of the Albee's finest features was its Wurlitzer organ, Cincinnati's largest. Officially it was Opus 1680, a three-manual, nineteen rank Style 260 Special, shipped five months earlier on July 25, 1927. Presiding at the console on opening night was Hy C. Geis, a Cincinnati native who had played in California and at the New York Rialto before being hired away from Buffalo's Lafayette Theatre for the Albee organ's premiere. Popular local organists including Johanna Grosse and Grace Baucom played the organ after its opening. By far the most well known organist, to present day readers, was Lee Erwin, who was named chief organist at the Albee in 1932. Despite its auspicious beginning and popularity with local citizenry, use of the organ had declined considerably within ten years and by the Forties it was seldom heard at all. By the Fifties it was as silent as the films Wurlitzers were built to accompany. Many people had forgotten that it was there, or else never even knew, until the Ohio Valley Chapter, then of ATOE, began to present silent film and organ shows at the Albee, using electronic organs and mentioning the presence of the long dormant Wur-

litzer.

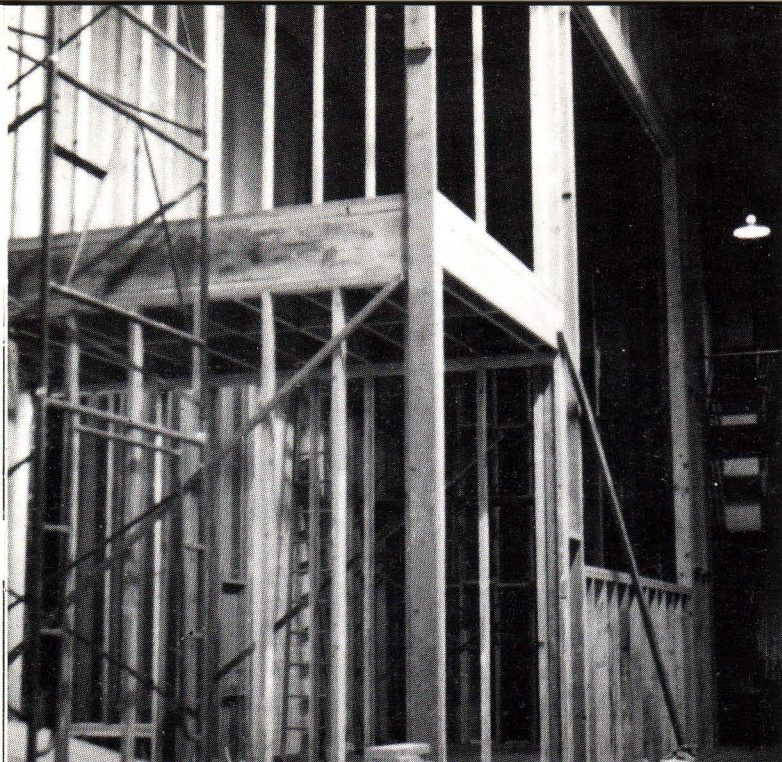
In 1968, when RKO-Stanley Warner began the giveaway of the organs left in its theatres, Walter Froehlich of RKO contacted Ed Wuest, Ohio Valley Chapter chairman at that time, to see whether there might be a place for the Albee organ in Cincinnati, subject to RKO's conditions of donation. A search was begun for a suitable location for the organ which would fulfill RKO's conditions; namely, a school or charitable institution willing to accept the organ, with sufficient space to house it properly. After much searching, the Ohio College of Applied Science-Ohio Mechanics Institute (OCAS-OMI) was found to be the best place for the organ. Ed, who was on its staff at the time, talked to the president and interested him in the idea. The school agreed to accept the organ; however, it was without the money and technical knowledge required to handle the removal and reinstallation of the organ, which was where the chapter came into the picture.

Connected with OCAS-OMI is Emery Auditorium, a fine old auditorium in downtown Cincinnati with excellent acoustics. Once the home of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, this would be the organ's new home. A preliminary verbal agreement with the school was

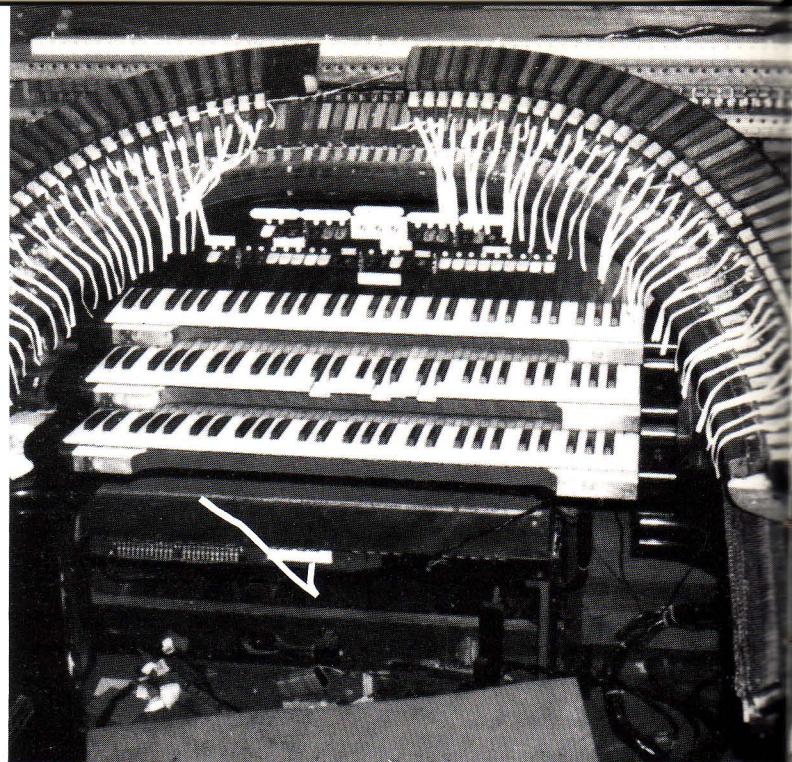
reached, and in July, 1968, the chapter's executive board voted to have the chapter undertake the removal of the organ from the Albee and its reinstallation in Emery Auditorium.

Ownership of the organ was transferred to OCAS-OMI in October, 1968. First plans were to restore the organ to playing condition in the Albee and give several public concerts on it there to raise money for the project ahead, but RKO pressed for its specified removal deadline of December 31, 1968, so this was not possible. Removal was begun late in 1968 by OCAS-OMI personnel and chapter members. Also begun late in 1968 were negotiations between the chapter and OCAS-OMI on the terms of a formal contract covering the organ's installation, maintenance, use, and eventual ownership by the chapter. Work on the reinstallation began soon after removal was complete, but little did anyone dream that it would be five years before we would have a signed contract.

George V. Eaglin, chapter chairman for several terms following Ed Wuest, spent many long hours on the contract, along with Bob McIntosh, the chapter's lawyer. At one point in the negotiations, when agreement between the two parties was nearly reached, it was announced that the University of Cincinnati was taking over OCAS-OMI, to operate it as one



Percussion Chamber (upper left) and Solo Chamber (rear) under construction.
(Blanche Underwood Photo)



View of partially completed console showing new back rail in place.
(Blanche Underwood Photo)

of UC's colleges. So, after much effort, we were back to the starting line again, this time negotiating with UC's Board of Trustees, who had acquired an organ along with their college. Fortunately, UC president Dr. Walter Langsam was a theatre organ fan, having been exposed to the three-manual, eighteen-rank Wurlitzer from Cincinnati's Paramount Theatre, located in the home of his neighbors, chapter members Jack and Joan Strader. He was enthusiastic over the prospects of the organ project and promised his support. Success was finally achieved in October, 1973, when the contract was signed, cementing the relationship between UC and the chapter concerning the organ.

Once the organ was completely removed from the Albee and safely stored in the basement of Emery Auditorium, plans were begun for its reinstallation. At first it was thought that the organ could simply be reassembled with some refurbishing, and overly optimistic dates for its completion were published. As the work progressed, however, it was soon evident that nothing short of a complete rebuilding would produce a first class instrument, and this was the course the chapter decided upon.

Since no organ had ever been installed or contemplated in Emery Auditorium, there were no existing chambers, making it necessary to construct new ones. Plans were made

by member Bob Klensch, who is a general contractor, for chambers to be located directly on the stage, as had initially been agreed upon by OCAS-OMI. When UC took over, the chapter was told to design chambers for placement in the walls on either side of the stage, in order to leave the stage open and fully usable. A test hole was cut in one of the walls to determine the feasibility of chamber placement there, but the wall was found to be too full of structural iron to allow chamber construction. It was decided that the next best place would be in the wings at the sides of the first balcony, and plans were drawn up for that location. After further study, it was found that a balcony installation posed a number of problems also, and eventually UC agreed to locating the chambers on the stage as originally planned.

The chambers were built in 1974 by Bob Klensch, who did the job at cost through his company. In spite of that, five years had elapsed since the first chamber plans were made, and due to inflation, price increases, and modifications to the original design, the final cost came to nearly five times the original estimate. This surely would have bankrupted the chapter, had it not been for the generosity of Jack and Joan Strader, who saw the problem and paid the bill as a gift to the university. The chambers are exceptionally large and uncrowded, making it very easy to in-

stall and maintain the organ, as well as allowing space for additional ranks to be added later. Everything in the chambers is readily accessible. There are three chambers, main, solo, and percussion. The percussion chamber is located above and between the main and solo chambers. The main and solo are each twenty-two feet wide and have a total of seventy-two swell shades, so there is nothing in the way of the sound when all the shades are open.

A master plan for the organ's design and reinstallation was prepared by Herbert Wottle and E.S. "Tote" Pratt. Herb served as chairman of the project in its early period, and then as co-chairman with Tote, who is now chairman of the project. The plan calls for the eventual addition of seven ranks to the original nineteen, for a total of twenty-six. Wurlitzer chests were acquired for the extra ranks and have been included in the initial installation so that the additional pipes may be added later without disturbing any of the original pipework. One rank has been added so far, a 16' thirty-two pipe pedal Violone from the Austin organ in the Liberty Theatre in Covington, Kentucky. It is believed that this is one of the few theatre organs to have an independent 16' pedal rank. The rank is a gift of member Herbert Merritt.

The console, when removed from the theatre, was in the usual poor shape of such consoles, with multiple



Easing a four rank chest into place in the Main Chamber.

(Blanche Underwood Photo)



Moving a five rank chest from work area to the chambers. L to R: Rick Weisenberger, Phil Underwood, Bill Ahlert, Howard Van Styn (on lift truck).

(Blanche Underwood Photo)

coats of paint, dents and gouges, and plenty of dirt. It has been refinished to look like new in ebony, by Hubert Shearin, who contributed the job through his company, Manual Arts Furniture. Gold trim will be added later. The console sits on a red-carpeted platform in front of the stage on the left side, in approximately the same position it had in the Albee. The stop tabs for the original nineteen ranks have been retained on the curved stoprails without change, with the exception of the addition of piano stops where the swell indicators were located. A new back rail was designed by Herb Wottle and includes the original back rail stops plus the ones for the additional ranks as they are added. The console is ready for the extra ranks, with the stop tabs installed. The new back rail is equipped with quick disconnects for easy servicing. The console has a new solid-state cancel system, designed and built by Herb Wottle. It features eight independent cancel actions: all tremos off, piano off, traps off, four manual cancels, and general cancel. An additional expression pedal has been added for the percussion chamber, which was not in the original Albee installation.

A few modifications and improvements have been made as the organ was rebuilt. Two additional regulators have been added so that all 16' offset chests are on untremmed regu-

lators for more effective tremulants on the manual chests and better wind supply under heavy demand conditions. There are now a total of eleven regulators. Additional tremulants have been added for greater flexibility and tonal variety, so that the organ now has nine separately usable tremos. Of course, the organ has been completely releathered and all rubber cloth has been replaced. All metal parts on the console and toy counter have been newly chrome plated. Many of the reiterating contact blocks on the percussions have been replaced, and all new magnet coils were installed on the manual and pedal relays to insure the greatest possible degree of reliability. All wood pipes and parts have been refinished wherever necessary. The object has been to have a forty nine year old "new" organ when the project is complete.

Chapter Chairman Hubert Shearin estimates that approximately 20,000 volunteer man-hours have been spent on the organ over a period of seven years. The work has been done mostly on Saturdays by a dedicated crew of members, including Phil and Blanche Underwood, Glenn Merriam, Spencer Avery, Bill Ahlert, Ed Rose, Ed Dooley, Don Campbell, Carol Powers, Art Kessler, Henry Arleth and Art Havlovic. Others who have helped include Sue Pratt, Florence Kipp, Carl Pratt, Joe Deifel, Bill Schott, Ken Kramer and Webb

Bond. In addition, other chapter members have helped from time to time. Herb Merritt is the crew chief for the solo and percussion chambers and John Scott is in charge of the main chamber installation. Both have done extensive work in laying out and installing metal windlines and generally overseeing all work in the chambers. Hubert Shearin has had made whatever new wood parts were needed.

In addition to working on the organ, Blanche Underwood has faithfully contributed lunch for the group each week and has photographed the entire project, providing a complete record of the progress. Tote Pratt, as chairman of the project, has given unstintingly of his time and energy. Howard Van Styn, of the OCAS staff, has been a great help so many times that it is impossible to keep track of them. His contribution to, and interest in, the success of the project has been much appreciated by the chapter. Appreciation is also due to Joe Alexander, who, as RKO Division Manager, was most helpful to the chapter in its presentation of silent film shows at the Albee and in the removal of the organ from the theatre.

The organ is very near to completion after seven long years, and excitement in the chapter is beginning to mount. It won't be long until Opus 1680 will sing again after decades of silence. □