

# Mighty Wurlitzer Notes

Semi-Annual Newsletter of Kentucky's Mighty Wurlitzer - Theatre Organ Project, Inc, Lexington, Kentucky

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Kentucky's Mighty Wurlitzer -Theatre Organ Project, Inc is a not-for-profit Kentucky Corporation organized under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Service Tax Code. This corporation was established to fund, restore and operate the 3/18 Mighty Wurlitzer theatre pipe organ in the Kentucky Theatre in Lexington.

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## MY INTERVIEW WITH FARNY WURLITZER

By Dr. John W. Landon



*Farny Wurlitzer in his North Tonowanda office shortly before his death. Photo from the Gary Shippe Collection - ATOS 50th Anniversary.*

After I had determined that I was going to write a full-length biography of the organist, Jesse Crawford, as the basis of my Ph.D., dissertation at Ball State University, Muncie, IN, I wondered how I might interview some of the principal characters responsible for his career. I knew Farny Wurlitzer of the company that bore his name was still living, but, he would not know who I was and might not be inclined to be interviewed.

I had a friend in the Central Indiana Chapter of the American Theatre Organ Society (ATOS), a Chapter which I had helped to found, who had installed a theatre pipe organ in his home. His name was Frank May and was a deeply dedicated enthusiast of the instrument who attended a number of ATOS conventions before I had been able to attend any. I shared my idea with him shortly before he left for another ATOS convention and he took upon himself to speak to Richard Simonton of California and the founder of the ATOS. Frank came home from the convention and told me to contact Simonton directly, which I did. He offered to be interviewed by me and I interviewed him several times in his North Hollywood mansion during the first week of March 1970.

Simonton was very helpful in opening many doors to me, doors of people who knew Crawford and had worked with him. Among them was Farny Wurlitzer. As a result of this contact, Farny agreed to be interviewed. He specified that no tape recordings be made of the interview, so I took along a stack of legal size pads and wrote furiously during the interview, not wanting to miss a word.

*(Continued on page 2)*

## President's Message

Welcome! This edition of Mighty Wurlitzer Notes contains interesting articles, fundraising endeavors, and other exciting information related to Kentucky's Mighty Wurlitzer project. Please take a few moments of your valuable time and read through the newsletter. Of particular interest to theatre organ aficionados is the feature article My Interview with Farny Wurlitzer by Dr. John W. Landon.

I attended the 2009 American Theatre Organ Society's (ATOS) National Convention in Cleveland, OH June 30-July 5, 2009. The Convention *Treasures of the Western Reserve* provided spectacular theatre venues, glorious sounding theatre pipe organs and organists of equal caliber, including young talent. Notable performances were presented by Donnie Rankin, Brett Valliant and Jonathan Ortloff and ATOS Youth Competition winner Nathan Avakian, all between the ages of 16 and 30; a fresh and exciting addition to the lineup of professional organists that made this convention

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**SAVE AMERICA'S  
TREASURES**  
OFFICIAL PROJECT

## Farny Wurlitzer Interview *(Continued from page 1)*

Farny Wurlitzer lived in a spacious home in Kenmore, a suburb of Buffalo. He had lived at that address since 1954 with his wife Grace, who had passed away in 1968. My interview took place on June 5, 1971. Mr. Wurlitzer was in a wheelchair, his lap covered by a robe. He welcomed me and said he would be happy to answer my questions. I had come prepared with quite a few of them. He was not a garrulous person, but, he answered each question briefly and succinctly. However, after the interview had gone on for an hour or two he became more talkative. His memory was very clear. He could quote names, places, and statistics with no hesitation. He told me about his father, Rudolph Wurlitzer, founding the Company in Cincinnati and that he, himself, moved to North Tonawanda, NY in 1909 after his marriage to Grace Keene, because his father had determined that the Company should move there. He had actually begun work for the Company beginning in 1904 and he shared his memories with me about visiting San Francisco in 1906 just after the great earthquake and fire when the city was still

in ruins.

Farny Wurlitzer worked for the Wurlitzer Company for 65-years. He was placed in the charge of the North Tonawanda factory and it was he who was the driving force behind the company's entrance into the theatre organ field. He said that the theatre organ had been "his baby" and he was delighted that it was being rediscovered at the time of my interview. He spoke of Jesse Crawford as the "best salesman Wurlitzer had ever had" and of the arrangement which the Company made with Victor Records to put on the label of every organ record by Jesse Crawford the words, "Played on the Wurlitzer Organ." Thus every record sold became a piece of Wurlitzer advertising.

We spoke of Robert Hope-Jones. He was kind in his assessment of him. He said that Hope-Jones was an inventor at heart and never gave up tinkering with the organs even when they were in the final stages of completion, adding greatly to the cost. He said they finally had to bar Hope-Jones from the factory and put him on a pension.

Farny Wurlitzer's keen eye for busi-

ness kept many an employee's check coming when other companies were going under during the Great Depression. When the sale of pipe organs declined Wurlitzer purchased the patent rights in 1933 to an automatic record-changing device. This led to the revival of interest in automatic musical instruments and Wurlitzer led the way with their juke boxes. The Wurlitzer Company continued to prosper under Farny's leadership; especially through the sale of pianos and later, electronic organs, when he became president in 1932 and chairman of the board in 1971. He retired from active duty at the factory in 1966, but was still connected with the Company at the time of my interview.

Exactly eleven months after my interview, Farny Wurlitzer died at his home on May 6, 1972 at the age of 88. An era died with him! I am most grateful that I could talk with him in person about Wurlitzer theatre pipe organs and about the great theatre organist of his time Jesse Crawford.

Dr. John W. Landon, noted author of several books, including *Jesse Crawford, Poet of the Organ*; *Wizard of the Mighty Wurlitzer* (The Vestal Press, 1974) and *Behold the Mighty Wurlitzer, The History of the Theatre Pipe Organ* (Greenwood Press, 1983); and is active with Kentucky's Mighty Wurlitzer project and serves as a Board Member.

## Bluegrass Chapter - ATOS Revived!



*Dr. John Landon concertising at his 3-Manual Allen Renaissance R311 digital theatre organ.*

The Bluegrass Chapter - American Theatre Organ Society has been revived! Formed in the early 1980's it flourished for years centered around the Kentucky Theatre's 3/14 Wurlitzer Theatre pipe organ installation in the residence of Oscar Wilson, Lexington, KY. The BGC-ATOS began its decline after the Wurlitzer organ was donated to the University of Kentucky in 1989.

You are cordially invited to attend the next Bluegrass Chapter Meeting on October 26, 2009, 7:00 PM at the home of Dr. John Landon, 809 Celia Lane, Lexington, KY. During this meeting, we will be discussing the activities of future meetings and planning a series of visits to regional theatre organ concerts, historic theatre crawls and other activities celebrating the heritage of the theatre pipe organ.

The BGC-ATOS is a separate membership organization which will also promote the visibility, educational and cultural benefits of Kentucky's Mighty Wurlitzer-Theatre Organ Project, Inc and our 3/18 Mighty Wurlitzer Theatre organ.

So mark your calendars and plan to attend this enjoyable meeting. You will have an opportunity to hear Dr. Landon's Allen R311 Renaissance digital theatre organ during open console, or you can visit old friends and make new ones while listening or playing this remarkable digi-

tal theatre organ. Please call Steve Brown 859-559-7541 with your RSVP by Friday noon on October 23, 2009.

## Thank You! Recent Donors:

Rebecca Som Castelano, Dr. David & Sarah Stevens, Hobert Ellis, Lendy Brown, Phyllis Hasbrouck, Jacob & Glenna Graves, Bruce Cotton, Markita M. Goodman, Thomas A. Duke, Frank Jenkins, Lillian Gentry, Thomas L. Conner, Jr., Ed & Sharon Bullard, Leesa & Darrell Powers, Geneva Cox, E. Clark Toleman, Gwen M. Burgess, Eleanor Grace Perreiah, Steve & Terry Wallin, Jon Parker & David Bugg, Bonnie Mink & Darlene Cox, Jimmy E. Mawyer, Mike & Dana Williams, Anne G. Kjelly, Cherry Owens, Neil & Jenny Eklund, Pauline L. Bayes, James P. Fields, Doug & Melissa Stephen; and a very special thank you to Sherman Carter Barnhart, PSC, and Brookhill Communications (Chuck & Stephanie Dowdy) and Versailles Printing (Steve and Terry Wallin) for their in-kind donations.

## President's Message *(Continued from page 1)*

a truly memorable and enjoyable event for me! In my opinion, the most magical event occurred at the Civic Theatre, Akron, OH, with Christian Elliott accompanying *The Mark of Zorro* (1920) featuring Douglas Fairbanks and his onscreen antics on the 3/19 Wurlitzer theatre organ with a historical musical score written specifically for this feature picture. A perfect match of a beautifully restored John Ebersson atmospheric theatre (1929), with the glorious sound of its original Wurlitzer theatre organ with the extraordinarily unison musical accompaniment by organist Chris Elliott; it just does not get any better than this!

Bill and Jane Johnson, and David Bottom have donated a 1918 vintage Wurlitzer Art Echo Reproducing Piano (serial number 31975) for use in the Percussion Chamber of our Kentucky's Mighty Wurlitzer project. The piano is now stored at the Singletary Center along with the 3/14 Wurlitzer Theatre organ and the other purchased historic Wurlitzer pipework and equipment. Carlton Smith will completely rebuild this historic reproducing upright piano, including the addition of a player action, so it can be played from the Wurlitzer console. Thank you, Bill, Jane and David for this special Wurlitzer equipment donation!

The 2009 Kentucky Theatre Summer Classic Film Series ended on September 16th with *Sixteen Candles* (1984), a film directed by John Hughes. As part of this Summer Series, Kentucky's Mighty Wurlitzer organists, Dr. John W. Landon (matinees), Dean McCleese and Brian Hunt (evening feature pictures) provided 30-minute organ overtures on the 2-manual Conn Theatre organ. Theatre crowds were attentive and enthusiastic with their applause. I extend a sincere thanks and appreciation to our organists for their time and musical performances during the Classic Film Series. Kentucky's Mighty Wurlitzer provided organists, at no cost to the theatre management or movie patrons, recreating the wondrous experience of the "Golden Age of the Movie Palace" (1920-32), albeit with a 1960's electronic organ; this program addition for all who attended the Wednesday Series at the historic

Kentucky Theatre, made it a special event for all!

Saint Martha's Episcopal Church was the location of a truly surprise Birthday Party for my "way over the hill 60th Birthday" on June 16th, two days before the actual event. Leading the party planning, while under the guise of the covert deception meeting, were Delmer Cox, Sue McFarland, Anne Kjelby, Sandy Denno, and the Reverend Bonnie Quantrell Jones. I was clueless! I thoroughly enjoyed a surprise birthday party and great time with friends, family, and delicious food for the thirty-five celebrants who attended. In lieu of gifts, donations were suggested to be made to the Wurlitzer project, which totaled \$690.00! What a special birthday celebration for me and many thanks to all for the donations.

Enclosed with this newsletter is a postcard, which will be used to determine reader interest in providing our Mighty Wurlitzer Notes via an email informing you to visit our website [www.kywurlitzer.com](http://www.kywurlitzer.com) to download the newsletter from your computer. The goal of this quest is to save some funds for printing and mailing costs for the newsletter, which can be used for the project. Kentucky's Mighty Wurlitzer Notes is mailed to approximately 3,250 recipients scattered all over this great country. Please complete the requested information and mail the post card if you are interested in receiving Mighty Wurlitzer Notes email notification. Your support for this initiative is greatly appreciated.

The Fundraising Committee has been busy writing grant applications to both national and local funding sources. KMW-TOP submitted a \$122,978.00 grant application to Save America's Treasures on May 23, 2009. This dollar for dollar match will provide \$245,956.00 for Phase A: 3/18 Wurlitzer Theatre Pipe Organ Restoration and Rebuilding. The Kentucky Theatre's Mighty Wurlitzer was designated as an "Official Project of Save America's Treasures" on June 25, 1999. The Kentucky Theatre's Mighty Wurlitzer is the only theatre pipe organ listed as an "Official" project. The May

23rd submittal represents our third grant application to Save America's Treasures for grant funding!

The W. Paul and Lucille Caudill Foundation responded favorably to our initial funding support contact letter by expressing their interest in our Phase B: Kentucky Theatre Renovation and Construction (\$360,000.00). Kentucky's Mighty Wurlitzer project will be submitting a challenge match grant application, requesting \$180,000, with a dollar for dollar match to the W. Paul and Lucille Caudill Little Foundation. To assist with the local match, the Lexington Fayette Urban County Government, as owner of the historic Kentucky Theatre, historically has continually expressed their interest with assisting with 50% of the matching funds (\$90,000); with the remaining 50% matching funds (\$90,000) to be raised through Kentucky's Mighty Wurlitzer Project's fundraising initiatives with local banks, businesses and corporate contributors desiring to support the W. Paul and Lucille Little Foundation's challenge match grant.

If a miracle happens, and Kentucky's Mighty Wurlitzer is awarded the challenge match grant funds requested from Save America's Treasures and the W. Paul and Lucille Caudill Little Foundation; we will be able to complete this Project, with your continued financial support and donation commitment, before the American Guild of Organists Regional Convention, Lexington, KY, which is scheduled in June 2011. The timing is right and Kentucky's Mighty Wurlitzer is ready for these challenge match grants!

In conclusion, I want to personally thank the nearly 600 contributing funding grant sources, individual donors, corporations and businesses who have generously contributed approximately \$250,000.00 since we started fundraising for this wonderful theatre organ Project in February 1998. Without this generosity we would not be at the level we have been able to achieve thus far! THANK YOU for being an organ donor!

**Be An Organ Donor**  
**Credit Card Donations!**  
[www.kywurlitzer.com](http://www.kywurlitzer.com)

# Mark Your Calendar!

## Regional Events Featuring The Theatre Pipe Organ

### AMERICAN THEATRE ORGAN SOCIETY (ATOS)

#### 2010 National Convention

Seattle, WA

Jun 29-July 3, 2010

[www.atos.org/conventions](http://www.atos.org/conventions)

### ALABAMA CHAPTER-ATOS

#### ALABAMA JUBILEE 2009-Regional Convention

November 27-29, 2009

[www.AlabamaTheatreOrgan.com](http://www.AlabamaTheatreOrgan.com) for more information

### CENTRA INDIANA CHAPTER – ATOS

[www.cicatos.org](http://www.cicatos.org) for more information

#### 2009 POPS ON PIPES with Jim Riggs

Emmerich Manual High School

2405 Madison Avenue

Indianapolis, IN

3/26 Wurlitzer theatre pipe organ

November 8th at 2:30 PM local time

### KENTUCKY'S MIGHTY WURLITZER PROGRAM EVENTS

The Historic Kentucky Theatre

214 East Main Street

Lexington, KY

2M Conn theatre organ

Mini-Concerts each Friday evening

30-minutes prior to feature picture

Dr. John W. Landon at the organ

for movies, schedules and times:

[www.kentuckytheatre.com](http://www.kentuckytheatre.com)

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY!

October 4, 2009

The Historic Kentucky Theatre

Celebrates its 87th Anniversary

