

## THE "UNIT ORCHESTRA"

During the early part of the silent film era, motion picture theatres throughout the country engaged pit orchestras and pianists to provide background music and effects for their stage shows and motion pictures. Because of the constantly rising costs of musicians in orchestras, many theatres found it necessary to "cut-back," often to just a pianist for performances.

About this time, an Englishman, Robert Hope-Jones, who was an electrical engineer by trade, developed a method of "electrifying" the pipe organ. This allowed the console of the organ to be placed at any position away from the pipes themselves. Hope-Jones envisioned an orchestral organ capable of all the sounds and percussions of the modern orchestra. This was quite unlike the customary voicing of the church organ. Upon arriving in this country, Hope-Jones convinced a group of backers to finance his ideas and the "Unit Orchestra" was born. His original ideas and designs were more fully developed when he joined with the Wurlitzer Company of North Tonawanda, New York and the term, "Mighty Wurlitzer" became a household word.

## THE ORGAN

During the late teens and early twenties, movie theatres both large and small installed theatre pipe organs. However, with the appearance of sound movies, the need for theatre organs diminished and most of them fell into disrepair through lack of use. Many were left silent in the orchestra pit never to sound again.

But the theatre organ of the Paramount Theatre in Oakland, California was only beginning an increasingly exciting and long life story. Installed in 1931 at a price of \$20,000 this Mighty Wurlitzer enjoyed only a brief period of glory before the theatre closed in 1932. By the late 1950's, the organ was sold and placed in storage. Around 1960 it was installed in its first restaurant venue, 'Ken's Melody Inn' in Los Altos, California, where it remained until purchased for the Paramount Music Palace in Indianapolis. At this point, it was greatly enlarged and rebuilt by the Crome Organ Company. Upon the Indianapolis restaurant's closure in 1995, it was purchased to be installed in a musical museum located in Germany. When plans for this fell through, it was purchased for use in the Roaring 20's Pizza and Pipes.

Originally the organ was the last in the series of 17 identical instruments built for the large Publix movie houses in a style designated as "Publix No.1". This style was of 4 manuals (keyboards) and 20 ranks (or sets) of pipes. A total redesign of the organ was made in 1978 increasing the number of ranks to 42. The Art Deco style console (of which Wurlitzer built only ten) had floral motifs on the sides and the "waterfall" cap pieces on the top. The coloration of the console was changed in 1978 from the original gold to ebony with the Art Deco designs being highlighted in Gold, Bronze, Copper and Silver Leaf. The organ is powered by a 20 horsepower Spencer Blower which supplies air for the 3,000 organ pipes and percussions. Most of the percussions (chimes, xylophone, glockenspiel, chrysoglott, marimba, sleigh bells, piano, drums, traps and effects) are located outside of the organ chambers. The volume of the organ is controlled by the "shutters" above the glass pipe windows, which allow the sound to project into the restaurant. The burgundy-colored tube-looking line around the restaurant are the wind lines that carry the wind from the blower to the instruments.

## OTHER FACTS

12,500 watts in blower • 20 horsepower blower • 3,000 cubic feet of air per minute

Largest pipe: 16 feet; 14" diameter • Smallest pipe: size of pencil

Over 26 miles of wiring

31,250 lbs. weight • 350 controls - 278 tabs • 3,000 pipes

No. of man-hours to rebuild: 2,591 • No. of man hours to install: 1,700