

# ABSTRACT

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## *Organist-Led Community Singing in the American Picture Palace, 1925–1933*

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**D**URING THE 1920S, most urban Americans participated in community singing at least once a week. They did so at the local picture palace, a multimedia venue that combined motion pictures with live entertainment. These stately theaters, found in cities across the nation after 1913, represented the cultural acceptance of motion pictures as a form of entertainment suitable for the middle class. Since 1905, films exhibited in urban nickelodeon theaters had been attracting a working-class audience. To counteract negative associations between the motion picture and its rough clientele, picture-palace exhibitors offered their patrons every luxury, including air conditioning, comfortable lounges, glamorous décor, and complimentary child care. Individual theaters replicated the architecture and ornamentation of famous palaces, opera houses, and hotels, while the attentive service made visitors feel like European nobility.

Among the luxuries in store for the visitor was a diverse program of live entertainment, including an overture, an organ solo, and a stage show. The overture was presented by the house orchestra, while the stage show featured guest artists and local favorites, most of whom performed in costume before an elaborate set. Audience

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singing was sometimes led by stage performers or band leaders, or by sing-along films (popular throughout the '20s and '30s). Most of the time, however, community singing was led by the organist. The term "organ solo" is the trade designation for the portion of the show over which the organist had complete control. The organist could use his ten minutes in a variety of ways, but in many theaters the organ solo was dedicated to community singing. The organist used lantern slides to project song lyrics onto the movie screen. He also used slides to communicate with his patrons.

Community singing was practiced in theaters across the country, but it was not welcome in "class" picture houses that offered highbrow entertainment. In addition to this, trade-press commentators criticized the practice and listed reasons for which it should be abolished. Apologists noted that, while community singing did not utilize the talents of the organist or the capabilities of the organ, it was loved by audiences and would not disappear until it fell out of favor. An organist who practiced community singing crafted his presentation style based on the theater's location. An organist in a downtown house tried to appeal to a broad audience and did not expect any one patron to attend regularly. A neighborhood organist, on the other hand, had to develop a committed local patronage in order to keep the theater in business. To do so he would encourage community spirit and become involved in local affairs. He might also form an "organ club," which he could use as a basis to admit members, invite requests, and recognize individual patrons as a part of his solo.

Community singing was a popular form of entertainment, but it served other needs of the film and music industries as well. To begin with, it was an important vehicle for song plugging in the 1920s and '30s, and music publishers provided organists with free slides to ensure that their latest songs received exposure. This arrangement benefitted both parties. The publishers received cheap advertising that was particularly effective, for movie patrons not only heard the songs but actually sang them. The organist in turn was spared a great deal of work in preparing his solo. The attractive

slides provided by publishers not only included song lyrics but also narratives, jokes, and illustrations. Exhibitors, on the other hand, used community singing to police the behavior of their audiences. Organists and theater managers noticed that patrons were more polite to one another after engaging in community singing. They also observed that patrons who had participated exuberantly in community singing were more likely to enjoy the remainder of the program, including the stage show and feature film.

The role of the organist, and therefore the role of community singing, changed enormously with the introduction of film sound. Exhibitors began to wire their theaters for sound in the late 1920s, and most musicians lost their jobs as a result. Organists were only retained in the largest and most important picture palaces, where they were valued as the last human element in an increasingly mechanized program. Community singing gave the sound-era patrons a rare opportunity to make noise. Participatory culture in the movie theater, however, declined throughout the 1930s.





Organist-Led  
Community Singing  
in the  
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1925-1933

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## CHAPTER 1

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# INTRODUCTION

**T**HIS STUDY describes the practice of organist-led community singing in the picture palaces of the 1920s and early '30s. Because this is the first extended exploration of picture-palace community singing, I have attempted to provide a detailed account of what typically took place during a “sing” and also to investigate some of the important characteristics of community singing as it was differently conducted in different types of theaters. To accomplish these aims, I oscillate between a general, nation-wide perspective and a specific, localized one. In doing so, I hope to provide a vivid picture of the community singing experience that many urban moviegoers of the 1920s and '30s shared. As will be seen, that experience was always dependent on the styles and personalities of the individual organists who led the sings—and whose careers among the varying class-levels of movie theaters will play a large role in what follows.

### Why the Picture Palace?

In the 1920s and '30s, picture-palace entertainment was ubiquitous in urban American culture. Most people still visit movie theaters today, but the motion-picture experience of the '20s and '30s was unlike anything that we currently experience. Broadly considered, two characteristics of motion picture exhibition have changed

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dramatically since that era: in the 1920s, the contents of the theatrical experience were far more varied, incorporating live entertainment as well as films; and patrons of that era were far more regular in their attendance. The diverse elements of a 1920s picture-palace presentation—the complete show, so to speak—will be introduced in Chapter 2. The “community sing” will be discussed among the other non-cinematic offerings of the picture show. Equally important to this study, however, is our close attention to the attendance habits of palace-era patrons. The picture palace provides us with as a window into early-twentieth-century music consumption habits, since its programming was enjoyed by a large number of people on a regular basis.

No general studies of theater attendance were conducted in the 1920s themselves. Instead, industry professionals and non-industry sociologists surveyed specific segments of the population, usually on a localized scale, in order to gather data for their own purposes. Those within the film industry were primarily interested in tracking tastes for the purposes of film production and advertising. Their reports tell us a great deal about what theatergoers enjoyed but contain little useful information about their numbers or attendance habits. Sociologists of the time were generally interested in the moviegoing habits of young people. Reformers had been fearful of the effects of film consumption on children since the nickelodeon era (1905–ca. 1913), and their concerns were rekindled during the 1920s. (I discuss these concerns in Chapter 5.) As a result, sociological commentaries of the time tended to ignore the habits of adult theatergoers and therefore provide us with only a partial account of attendance habits.<sup>1</sup>

All the same, one can piece individual parts of this information together to create a meaningful account of motion-picture theater attendance in the 1920s. For example, *The New York Times* reported in 1923 that 40 percent of children in both cities and towns visited the theater about once a week, while 40 percent went twice a week or

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1 Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915–1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 25-6.

more often. Only 3 percent of children did not attend the theater at all.<sup>2</sup> Also in 1923, a national poll of 37,000 high-school students revealed that most young people visited the movie theater at least once a week, either in the company of their families or friends.<sup>3</sup> These are high numbers. It seems that children in the 1920s attended the picture theater far more often than children today.

This 1923 poll was printed in *Film Daily Yearbook of Motion Pictures*, an annual compilation of data concerning the film industry. *Film Daily Yearbook* published other statistics as well, although the journal did not always indicate the source of its information. For example, the 1927 edition of *Film Daily Yearbook*, published near the height of the picture-palace era, claims that the weekly picture-theater attendance in cities of 25,000 was 14,800—a figure which suggests that at least half of all urban Americans were visiting the movie house once a week or more. In 1951, *Film Daily Yearbook* published a retrospective set of attendance figures which claimed that weekly paid admissions to movie theaters had hit 65 million (more than half of the total population) in 1928.<sup>4</sup> However reliable or complete these figures might be, it is clear that enormous numbers of urban Americans attended the theater regularly, and that most theatergoers patronized the movies every week.

This last conclusion is also supported by the programming practices of picture theaters in the 1920s. At the height of the picture-palace era, theaters changed their programs on a weekly basis.<sup>5</sup> This means that each week the various components

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2 The author attributes these figures to “surveys made by civic associations” (Thomas H. Dickinson, “Movies Changing Life of the Nation,” *New York Times*, July 1, 1923, xx1).

3 This poll was conducted by the Russell Sage Foundation, the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, and Associated First National Exhibitors (Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment*, 28-9).

4 Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment*, 26.

5 In 1923, the *New York Times* distinguished between the changing practices of theaters based on location: “Fashions differ between those theatres which serve a congested neighborhood, and the large theatres which serve a city or wide suburban or rural areas. In the former daily changes are the rule; in the latter the rule is two changes a week” (Dickinson, “Movies Changing Life of the Nation,” xx1). Urban picture palaces, which offered an elaborate program of entertainment, changed the least often.

## Chapter 1. Introduction

of the experience—overture, organ solo, stage show, short films, and feature—were all new. Palaces worked on this schedule because they expected regular patrons to return every week to enjoy the new round of offerings. In the case of the serial short film, it was necessary to return each week in order catch developments in the story. The spectacular nature of palace presentation also encouraged patrons not to miss a show, for each often promised to be grander than the last.

In general, across the United States, the picture palace tried to become an important part of local life. Managers took every opportunity to support community activities and to promote the picture palace as a center for wholesome and neighborly entertainment. Key figures in all of this were the organist and the master of ceremonies, both of whom strove to develop personal connections with their patrons, who in turn were encouraged to think of the stage personalities as friends and the picture palace as a second home (Chapter 2). Since movie theater admission prices were relatively low (and since of course this was the pre-television era), it is not surprising that picture-palace attendance easily became a weekly habit.

Because picture-palace entertainment was a constant presence in the lives of so many, we can study the offerings of palaces to learn about the tastes and life experiences of urban Americans. But how much can we learn? When we study the public for motion picture entertainment, we find out two things: that patrons chose to attend the show because they expected to enjoy it, and that the public freely expressed their appreciation or distaste for a given presentation. (Patrons typically did not shout or otherwise protest, but they did exercise their right to withhold applause.) As we uncover this information, we can determine which entertainment offerings pleased the patrons and met their expectations for appropriate content, even while the theater audience normally had no direct role in the planning of any individual program.

The entertainment that appeared in the picture palaces was tailored by exhibitors to suit the patrons, not necessarily as they *were* but as the management perceived and

desired them to be. But picture-palace entertainment was a two-way street. Exhibitors presented entertainment that they thought would appeal to the patrons whom they hoped to attract. In turn, those patrons would then express their approval or disapproval while simultaneously developing a taste for the offerings made available. Excellent public transportation in large cities meant that patrons could attend the theater of their choice. At the same time, exhibitors policed audience behavior within their individual theaters and worked persistently to influence their patrons' tastes.

Exhibitors themselves had different ideas about their obligation to the public. Reflecting on his career in 1941, Samuel L. Rothafel, the most successful and influential producer of live entertainment for the picture palace, had the following to say: "All you hear about these days is the everlasting cry of theatre managers that they are looking for 'what the people want.' That idea is fundamentally and disasterously wrong. The people themselves don't know what they want. They want to be entertained, that's all. Don't 'give the people what they want'—give 'em something better."<sup>6</sup> To be sure, this statement is charged with Rothafel's famously over-the-top showmanship, and there is no reason to take him at his word. Still, let us consider Rothafel's position. If his was indeed a characteristic attitude, then one could not learn about the audience only by studying the provided entertainment. From this point of view, the theater patron had neither a valid opinion on the subject of entertainment nor any influence on what he or she was offered.

Other entertainers, however, took quite the opposite view. In 1927, the celebrated Chicago theater organist Edward Meikel wrote: "It is my frank opinion that you can't shout down a thing editorially against popular preference... The public seems to want community singing, and there isn't a showman in the world who isn't trying to give the public what it wants."<sup>7</sup> While there was at least one showman who wasn't

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6 S.L. Rothafel interview in *Green Book* magazine, 1941; cited in Ben Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1961), 37.

7 Ed. Meikel, "Community Sings Passing? Not Yet, Says Organist," *Exhibitors Herald*, November 26, 1927, 25.

trying to give the public only what it wanted—Rothafel—Meikel was an influential and successful entertainer in his own right, and his words represented a popular opinion (Figure 1.1).

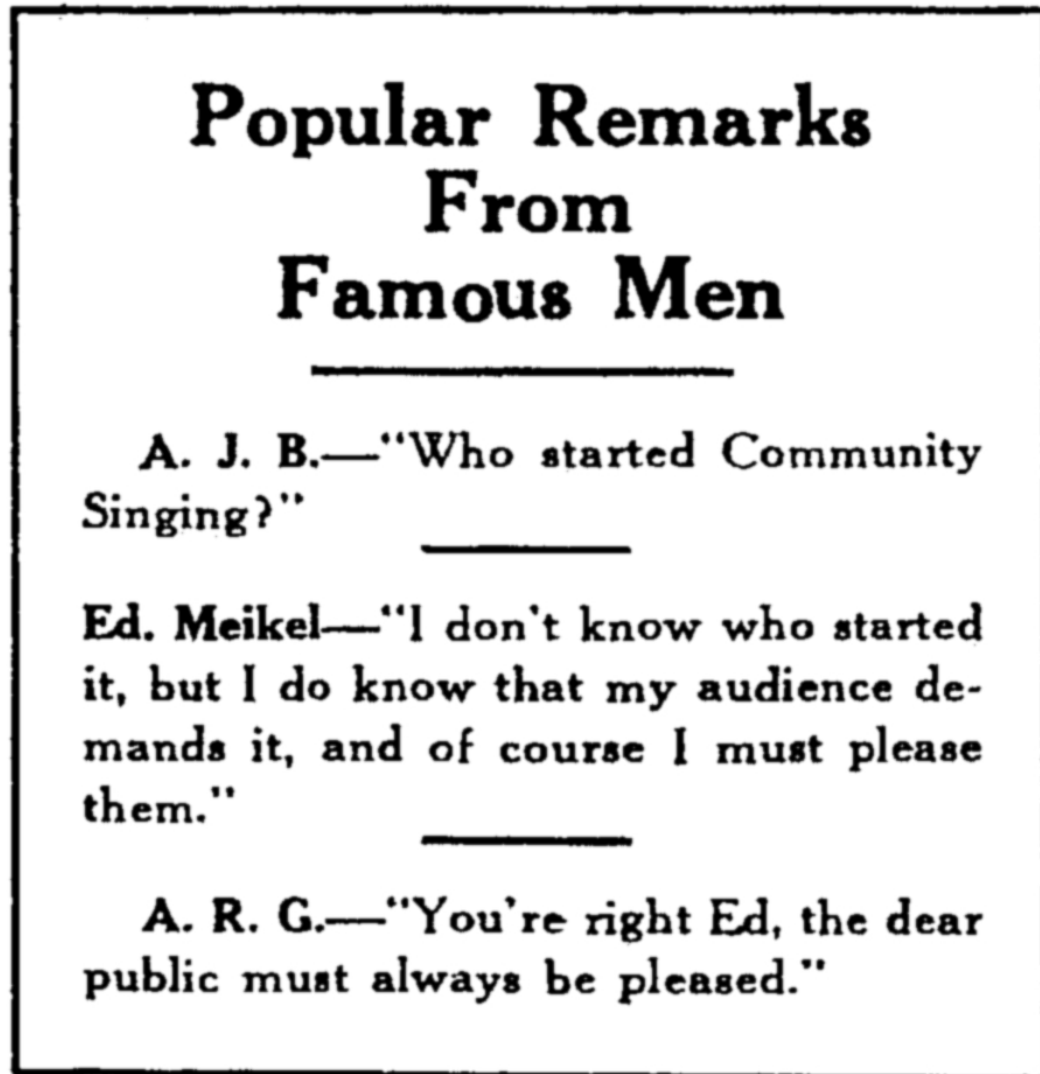
By 1924, Emil Breitenfeld, a columnist in the “Photoplaying” pages of the monthly *American Organist*, had already taken the middle ground with a third opinion: “It is the audience who decides. The theaters must please them and the organist must please them. With this rule it is absurd to quarrel... They are not hard to please. Let us find out what they want and give it to them. And in order to find out what they want let’s study them a bit.”<sup>8</sup> According to Breitenfeld, the exhibitor had to assume Rothafelian total control of the entertainment but could not succeed without a careful study of his patrons. The audience was then free to accept or reject whatever the exhibitor devised for them. If this is an accurate description of film exhibition in the picture-palace era—and I believe that it is—then we can indeed learn about the tastes and inclinations of theater patrons by studying the entertainment they consumed.

Community singing provides a powerful example of the give-and-take that existed between exhibitor and customer. Because patrons were actually called upon to participate in the entertainment, they were able to directly determine its character and success. Community singing also reflected the exhibitors’ desire to actively influence taste. Beginning in the mid-1920s, a great deal of conflict arose over whether it was in the theater’s best interest to offer only “high-class” (that is, cultured and artistic) entertainment or to allow patrons to influence the offerings with their preference for low-class community singing. For years the trade press aired this debate, featuring conflicting opinions on the practice. One side claimed that it was the responsibility of the picture palace to educate its patrons with better entertainment, while the other insisted that the palace must provide the entertainment demanded by the audience, no matter how distasteful (Chapter 4). In the end, community singing lasted because

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8 Emil Breitenfeld, “Our Friend the Audience,” *American Organist*, April 1924, 209.





**Figure 1.1:** The purpose of this exchange, which appeared alongside advertisements in a June 1928 edition of *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, is unclear. "A.J.B." must be the exhibitor A.J. Balaban, while "A.R.G." could be any of several organists and exhibitors. However, the exchange clearly illustrates the popular acceptance of Meikel's position (although A.R.G.'s reference to "the dear public" suggests a touch of sarcasm).

it was so popular with audiences that no business-minded exhibitor could afford to refuse it. It is in this way that patrons asserted their control over the picture-palace show. They did not decide to bring community singing into the theater, but they embraced it and made it a part of their lives.

## Influences on Picture-Palace Community Singing

The community singing practiced in the picture palaces of the 1920s and early 1930s was unique to its time and place. The American public had never witnessed anything quite like it before, and a comparable mode of public singing has not arisen since. Still, this was by no means the earliest example of community singing in the movie theater, nor was it the only instance of community singing activity during the 1920s. In fact, picture-palace singing thrived *because* community singing enjoyed great popularity in American communities during the late teens and '20s.

Picture-palace community singing was a more modern product of two other singing practices of the early 20th century: the illustrated song, which had introduced participatory singing into the earliest movie theaters; and the community singing movement, which had developed during the Great War as an expression of national unity and patriotism. Although both of these forms required audience participation, they were unrelated and dissimilar. The practice of the illustrated song relied on a solo singer, presented contemporary repertoire, and urged participants to purchase the related sheet music. The community sing eschewed solo performance, presented classic repertoire, and urged participants to support American ideals.

Because illustrated songs were presented in nickelodeon theaters—the ancestors of the picture palaces—it is easy to imagine that illustrated songs were in turn the ancestors of picture-palace sing-alongs. To do so, however, is a mistake. A closer study of the development of the picture show demonstrates that the illustrated song and

the picture-palace community sing have almost nothing to do with each other. As will become clear, the picture-palace sing developed directly from the community singing movement and should be considered an extension of it. That said, the importance of the illustrated song should not be completely discounted.

### *The Illustrated Song*

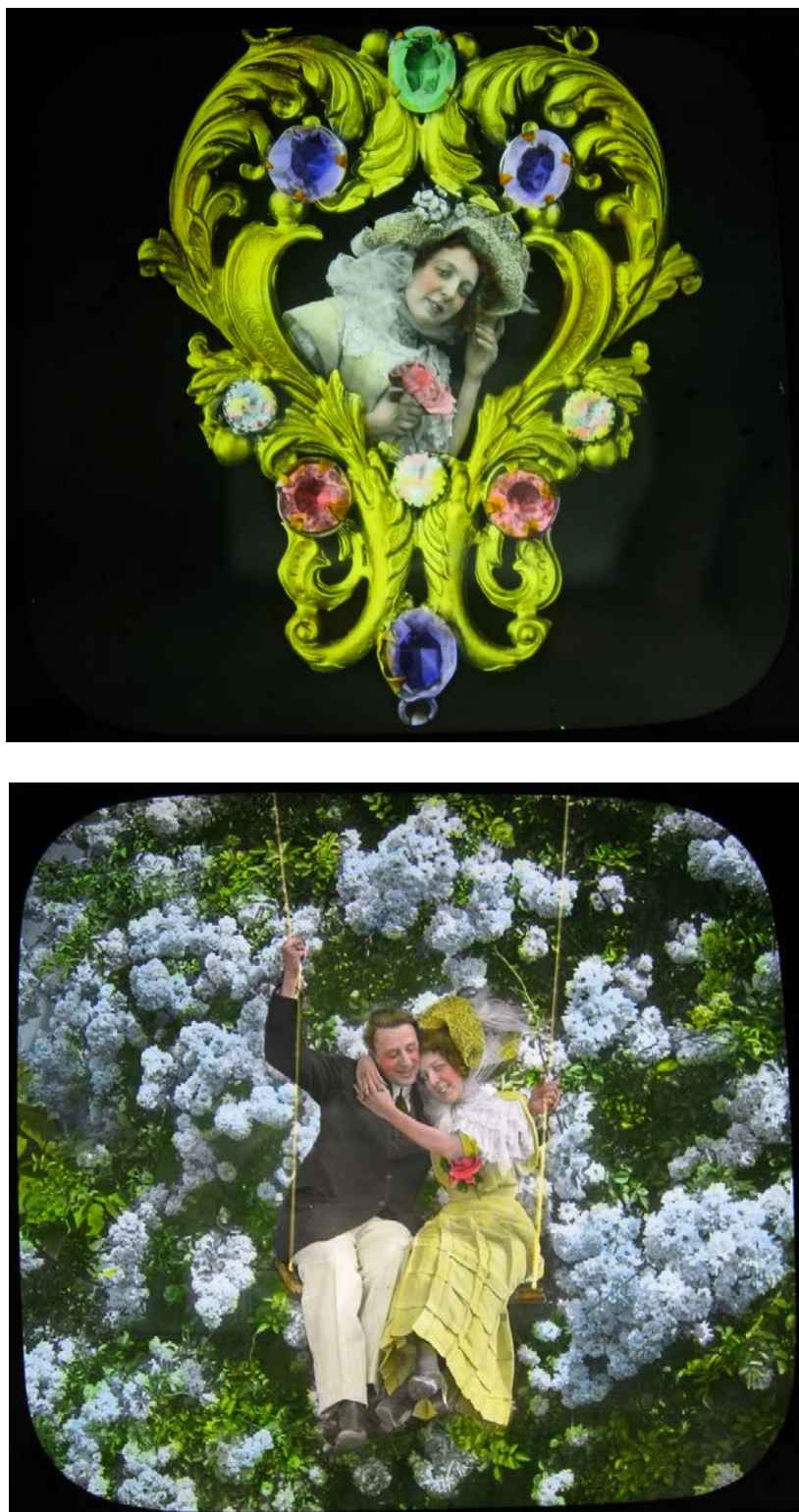
Because the illustrated song was still in the cultural consciousness of theatergoers in the 1920s—and was even occasionally resurrected within the picture-palace show as a nostalgic ploy<sup>9</sup>—it is worth glancing at a brief account of its form and history. The illustrated song was a turn-of-the-century musical presentation in which a song was brought to life with projected images (Figure 1.2). A performance required at least two participants: one (or two) to sing and play the piano, and one to operate the magic lantern. While the musician(s) performed the song, the projectionist exhibited a series of pictorial slides designed to illustrate the text. The last slide in the series contained the words to the chorus and, most often, an exhortation for all to join in.

The earliest American experiments with song illustration took place during the Civil War.<sup>10</sup> It was not until the early 1890s, however, that the illustrated song became

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9 “Inside Stuff On Music,” *Variety*, October 7, 1925, 49; “Organ Solos: Preston Sellers,” *Exhibitors Herald*, August 20, 1927, 41.

10 The development of the illustrated song is associated with two Civil War-era figures. The first of these was a travelling evangelist named Philip Phillips, who exhibited religious song slides in churches (Matthew Mooney, “‘All Join in the Chorus’: Sheet Music, Vaudeville, and the Formation of American Cinema, 1904-1914” (PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 2006), 49). The second was the famed showman Tony Pastor, who acquired a set of slides to accompany his 1863 song “Heroes of the War.” These slides seem to have been a haphazard collection of appropriate images—mostly generals and some battle scenes—purchased from a lantern slide company, rather than a set of images commissioned to illustrate the text. Pastor associated the notion of song illustration with the inflammation of patriotic spirit. After the Civil War was over, Pastor abandoned the illustrated song until an opportunity for revival of his idea came during the Spanish-American war in 1898 (Harry S. Marion, “Illustrated Songs,” *The Moving Picture World*, March 26, 1927, 331). The history of illustrated song development is hopelessly confused. For example, Pastor’s manager, H.S. Sanderson, claimed in 1909 that he gave Pastor the idea of exploiting “tableaux or paintings of song subjects” so as to enhance the performance of a song, but he gives the date of 1873—ten years later than the date provided by other commentators (H.S. Sanderson, “The History of Song Slides,” *The Moving Picture World*, May 29, 1909, 716-7).



**Figure 1.2:** These two slides are from the 1910 song “It’s You, Pal.” They were created by the New York firm of Scott & Van Alena. From the author’s personal collection.

a standard vaudeville turn. Illustrated songs became popular on vaudeville stages everywhere, as well as in beach-resort “concert halls” and dime museums.<sup>11</sup> Certain teams of song illustrators, always made up of a singer and a projector, were famous for a particular song, which they would perform hundreds of times as they toured the country. The most famous late-nineteenth century team was that of Joe Maxwell and Al Simpson, who specialized in a “fire” song written and performed by the former. The striking images were always complemented with slides featuring the local fire chiefs, which landed the pair many a sponsored engagement. Simpson went on to become a leader in the production of illustrated song slides for the next two decades.<sup>12</sup>

The mid-1890s saw a significant development in the use of illustrated songs, which were becoming more than mere entertainment. In 1894, the song-writing and publishing team of Edward Marks and Joseph Stern commissioned a set of lantern slides for their song “The Little Lost Child” with the idea that illustrations would help promote the song and increase its popularity. This use of the illustrated song was different from all that preceded it because Marks and Stern were not interested in the success of any particular performance or performer of the song, but were instead interested in the success of the song itself.<sup>13</sup> Over the next few years, illustrated songs became the exclusive tool of music promoters, who employed them specifically to create hits and sell sheet music. When illustrated songs were exhibited in movie theaters, the sheet music was often available for purchase at the ticket counter,<sup>14</sup> or even sold in the audience.<sup>15</sup> For some time, publishers had provided vaudeville singers with free sheet music and cash payments in order to assure the performance of their

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<sup>11</sup> Marion, “Illustrated Songs,” 331.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 331.

<sup>13</sup> Mooney, “All Join in the Chorus,” 51, 73.

<sup>14</sup> Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 190.

<sup>15</sup> “The Value of Lantern Slides as Advertisements for Sheet Music,” *The Moving Picture World*, May 15, 1909, 633.

songs. Beginning in the mid-1890s, publishers provided singers with complementary illustrated song slides as well.<sup>16</sup>

The illustrated song became ubiquitous when it was incorporated into the earliest motion-picture shows, circa 1905. These two forms of entertainment were inseparable for most of a decade, and it was through the motion-picture show that illustrated songs gained national publicity and lasting fame. The first venue dedicated to motion-picture exhibition opened in Pittsburgh in 1905. These theaters quickly acquired the nickname “nickelodeon,” a pseudo-Greek neologism combining “nickel” (the cost for admittance) and the Greek word for theater.<sup>17</sup> Nickelodeons were small storefront theaters that offered a mixture of vaudeville, illustrated songs, and motion pictures. The nickelodeon was not often one’s final destination but rather a place to stop off for a few minutes of cheap entertainment. For the five-cent fee a patron could enter at any point in the show and stay for as long as he or she pleased. As one writer noted in 1907, “They are great places for the foot-sore shopper, who is not used to cement sidewalks, to rest. It is much more comfortable than to take street-car rides to rest, and they don’t have to pay the return nickel.”<sup>18</sup>

Nickelodeons were inexpensive to set up and operate, and they remained small—under 200 seats—to avoid the steep licensing fees that plagued legitimate theaters.<sup>19</sup> These early-century entertainment venues were popular in urban neighborhoods and small rural communities. Urban nickelodeons typically offered continuous shows of about fifteen minutes in length, and the program was changed one to three times a week.<sup>20</sup> Nickelodeons were often reputed to attract only the lowest-class patrons—“a

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16 Mooney, “All Join in the Chorus,” 48.

17 “What is a Nickelodeon?,” *The Moving Picture World*, October 1, 1910, 742.

18 “The Nickelodeon,” *The Moving Picture World*, May 4, 1907, 140.

19 Joseph Mendill Patterson, “The Nickelodeons,” *The Moving Picture World*, January 11, 1908, 21.

20 Altman, *Silent Film Sound*, 119-120.

section of the population that formerly knew or cared little about the drama"<sup>21</sup>—but in fact they operated across a wide spectrum of respectability.<sup>22</sup> One observer noted that children constituted a third of the total audience. These theaters were also very attractive to urban immigrants, who, for only five cents, could remain all day to study the fashions and customs of the actors and learn English from the songs.<sup>23</sup>

Scholars today usually discuss the nickelodeon's role as the first movie theater, but this is only because movies continued to thrive and develop while the other elements of the nickelodeon program were fated to disappear. In their time, though, nickelodeons were not thought of as movie theaters. Instead, contemporary commentators referred to the establishments as "pic-vaude" houses and even "moving picture illustrated song theaters."<sup>24</sup> Some nickelodeons advertised their live entertainment more prominently than their films because managers considered the performing of the illustrated songs to be the biggest draw.<sup>25</sup>

The trade press remarked upon the wild success of these new-style theaters, but commentators were not certain which elements were destined for long-term success and which were doomed to extinction. There was a great deal of doubt at the time concerning the viability of moving pictures, which were often of low quality, usually of foreign origin, and in constant short supply.<sup>26</sup> Richard Abel notes that, by way of contrast, the illustrated song had an upbeat, "blatantly 'American'" effect on the nickelodeon program—unlike the notoriously bleak French films.<sup>27</sup> Vaudeville and

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21 Patterson, "The Nickelodeons," 21.

22 Russell Merritt, "The Nickelodeon Theater, 1905–1914: Building an audience for the movies," in *Exhibition, the Film Reader*, edited by Ina Rae Hark (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 21–2.

23 Richard Abel, "That Most American of Attractions, the Illustrated Song," in *The Sounds of Early Cinema*, edited by Richard Abel and Rick Altman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 149.

24 Altman, *Silent Film Sound*, 182.

25 Abel, "That Most American of Attractions, the Illustrated Song," 145–46.

26 Mooney, "All Join in the Chorus," 162.

27 Abel, "That Most American of Attractions, the Illustrated Song," 150. Abel also notes that the American-ness of illustrated songs prevented them from having an international influence. The

illustrated songs—for the latter now occupied their own category—were initially incorporated into the nickelodeon program because film production, especially in the United States, had not yet reached the capacity required to supply the necessary length of entertainment. It was only the illustrated song, however, that became established in the nickelodeons. Films and illustrated songs always appeared together at the end of vaudeville programs (probably because they shared the same projecting equipment), and it seemed only natural that they should continue to be paired.<sup>28</sup> Throughout the first decade of nickelodeon exhibition, featured films alternated with the presentation of one or two illustrated songs.<sup>29</sup>

During its brief existence, the illustrated song was plagued by troubles. Song publishers, nickelodeon exhibitors, and singers alike all found the illustrated song model to be unsustainable. Publishers were overwhelmed by demand for free slides, and their expenses ballooned while profits stagnated.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, exhibitors—in an effort to keep their program fresh—refused to repeat songs for more than a few days, which meant that the songs were not being adequately plugged.<sup>31</sup> Some slide makers released shoddy sets of illustrations,<sup>32</sup> while reputable slide producers became the victims of pirates, who copied their slides and sold cheap knock-offs,<sup>33</sup> and unscrupulous singers, who resold complementary sets of slides below the going rate.<sup>34</sup> Competition drove wages for singers so low that competent performers left

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English lyrics and domestic images helped immigrants to acclimate, but also confined the illustrated song phenomenon to the United States.

28 Abel, “That Most American of Attractions, the Illustrated Song,” 143-44.

29 Altman, *Silent Film Sound*, 185.

30 Mooney, “All Join in the Chorus,” 54, 68, 124, 183-84.

31 “Not a Song Hit on the Market,” *The Moving Picture World*, July 4, 1908, 6.

32 “The Picture Show Singer,” *The Moving Picture World*, December 12, 1908, 475; “Watch Your Illustrations,” *The Moving Picture World*, December 19, 1908, 499.

33 “Moving Picture Shows Using Copied Lantern Slides,” *The Moving Picture World*, June 13, 1908, 514; “Anent Slide Copying,” *The Moving Picture World*, August 15, 1908, 124.

34 Mooney, “All Join in the Chorus,” 199, 202; “Illicit Trading in Song Slides,” *The Moving Picture World*, May 9, 1908, 419; “Among the Slide Makers,” *The Moving Picture World*, October 31, 1908, 337.



the industry.<sup>35</sup> As a result, inept illustrated song performances damaged the entertainment industry: they neither attracted patrons to the nickelodeon nor boosted sheet music sales.<sup>36</sup>

Given this litany of troubles, it is not surprising that the illustrated song should have been on the road to extinction. However, while the illustrated song had all but vanished from the nickelodeon by 1913, no scholar has yet fully explained its disappearance.<sup>37</sup> For the present, the conclusion reached by historian Matthew Mooney seems the most plausible: the film program itself was transforming in the early 'teens, and the new approach to exhibition emphasized the feature film while eliminating variety acts. This new format left no room for the illustrated song.<sup>38</sup> Film scholar Rick Altman supports this view with the observation that theaters were installing second projectors during this period, which allowed continuous exhibition of films. The illustrated song, therefore, was no longer needed to fill the gap created when the projectionist changed reels.<sup>39</sup>

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35 "Illustrated Song Men Want More Pay and Shorter Hours," *The Moving Picture World*, May 23, 1908, 459; "Nickelodeon Employees Threaten to Strike in Chicago," *The Moving Picture World*, September 19, 1908, 217.

36 Mooney, "All Join in the Chorus," 189-90; W. Stephen Bush, "Hints to Exhibitors," *The Moving Picture World*, October 24, 1908, 317.

37 For example, Rick Altman, a film scholar who has published extensively on the illustrated song, argues that the practice disappeared due to the increase in phonograph use by the early 'teens. The proliferation of recorded music meant that the market for sheet music was shrinking. Altman argues that the object of illustrated songs was to sell sheet music. When the product disappeared, the illustrated song was no longer needed to advertise it. This explanation is not entirely satisfactory. First, Matthew Mooney has demonstrated that, after 1908, music publishers had little to do with the illustrated song. It remained a part of the nickelodeon program because it was entertaining, not because it sold sheet music. Second, music publishers continued to plug their songs during live-entertainment programs for decades to come. It is certain that publishers did not lose interest in the movie theater as a plugging venue: they produced the slides that were used for community singing in the 1920s and '30s.

38 Mooney, "All Join in the Chorus," 244.

39 Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound*, 190; Mooney, "All Join in the Chorus," 226-7. Altman also makes the interesting observation that participatory culture was on the decline, due to the replacement of home pianos with phonographs. He suggests that "illustrated songs no longer had a role to play," now that theater audiences had become passive (Altman, *Silent Film Sound*, 191). It is true that music literacy and home music-making were on the decline. The community singing movement sought, in part, to reverse this trend. However, participation would remain central to film exhibition throughout the 1920s. In the silent era, every element of the picture show was participatory to a

The transformation of the film program described by Mooney did not stop with the elimination of illustrated songs and variety acts. In fact, the trend to eliminate live acts reversed completely with the development of picture-palace entertainment during the late 'teens.<sup>40</sup> When palace exhibitors introduced live acts back into the picture show, they were not padding a weak film program. On the contrary, they offered live entertainment as a luxury, and picture-palace patrons expected it to be of the highest quality. The stage shows of the 1920s bore little or no relation to the cheap vaudeville of the nickelodeon.

### *The Community Singing Movement*

At the same time that picture palaces were reintegrating live entertainment into their programs, another element of the nickelodeon experience—participatory singing—began to take on an important new role in the daily lives of Americans. Community singing—a public activity that most often centered around classic American songs—became very popular during the Great War, when it was used to boost patriotic spirit among soldiers and citizens. Even before the War, though, community organizations had begun to experiment with large-scale formal gatherings dedicated to participatory singing.

The organizations and individuals who conducted and advocated these “sings” believed that community singing improved American society in two important ways. First, it could provide a wholesome bulwark against distressingly changing times,

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degree. Patrons clapped, hollered, and booed in response to on-screen events. They also discussed the films with one another as they played. Both live and projected entertainment sought explicitly to elicit audience response. For example, the 1927 film “Love My Dog” invited the audience “to applaud if they want to save the life of a dog, about to be killed at the pound. The customers responded briskly” (“State,” *Variety*, February 9, 1927, 18). Only the community sing, however, relied one hundred percent on audience participation, and failed completely if this need was not met.

40 Samuel Rothafel was responsible for pairing stage entertainment with motion pictures. He developed his ideas in New York, where he resuscitated several failing theaters with his novel approach to film exhibition. The Rothafel model of picture-palace entertainment quickly became the norm (Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats*, 30-70).

and particularly against such changes that were racially marked. For John C. Freund, founder and editor of the publication *Musical America*, and others like him, community singing spread music literacy and thus encouraged the love of a higher-prestige music. Freund announced in 1919—all too hopefully—that community singing would eliminate the growing public taste for ragtime and jazz, and that vulgar dancing would be replaced by the waltz. With the aid of community singing, Americans throughout the nation would “gradually become inspired by music of a higher order,” especially European opera.<sup>41</sup> Community singing advocates also used the activity to promote community solidarity and neighborly spirit. In 1917, for example, the Los Angeles Board of Education inaugurated community singing with the aim “of bringing the people of various sections of the city in closer touch with each other.”<sup>42</sup> Many civic leaders hoped that community singing would reduce internal strife and improve mutual understanding. In the next decade, many motion-picture exhibitors hoped to accomplish the same thing when they offered community singing in the theater.

The first organized sings appear to have taken place in Baltimore. On March 5, 1915, the Peabody Institute staged a momentous “experiment”: a community singing concert in which patrons were accompanied by the conservatory’s Junior Orchestra. The concert was organized by “Miss May Jarrettson Evans,” director of the Peabody Preparatory Department, and the singing was led by “Mrs. Henrietta Baker Low,” former supervisor of music in the Baltimore public schools. (Women would continue to play a significant role as promoters and song leaders throughout the life of the community singing movement.) To aid in the singing, Evans provided all attendees with song books. The exercise was decidedly moralistic and educational: the repertoire, which would characterize community singing in Baltimore and other cities, was to consist of “simple, melodious and clean songs that all Americans ought to

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41 “Predicts Doom of Ragtime,” *The Washington Post*, March 10, 1919, 9.

42 “Inspire Patriotism,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 1917, 1112.

know.”<sup>43</sup>

Evans expected an audience of about twenty-five, but, in spite of a downpour, more than four hundred people arrived for the community singing event. The success of the concert triggered an onslaught of requests for a repeat, and community singing quickly outgrew the confines of the Peabody’s main performance hall. Evans then suggested to George Weems Williams, president of the Park Board, that community singing should be offered in Baltimore’s public parks, and in the summer of 1915 the pair offered a series of outdoor community singing concerts. The singing was accompanied by the Park Band and directed by bandmaster Daniel Feldmann, who also arranged the songs. Each program was announced in advance so that participants could review the songs, and their words were printed on preceding Sundays in *The Baltimore Sun*. The *Sun* also suggested that participants clip out the published lyrics and paste them in a book. This would not only produce a songbook which could be used at the park gatherings, but would also create a lasting anthology “of songs everyone ought to know.”<sup>44</sup>

The first community singing event took place in Baltimore’s Patterson Park on May 18, 1915, and it featured the songs “America,” “Old Folks at Home,” and “The Star-Spangled Banner.”<sup>45</sup> While this last song had not yet been designated as the national anthem, it was used by the Park Band to close all of their concerts even before community singing came into vogue. The singing numbers were integrated into a concert that lasted from 7:30 until 10 in the evening, during which the Park Band performed a wide-ranging selection of light classical favorites. These included several Marches, some music by Victor Herbert, a now-mysterious “Overture—Jubilee” attributed to Bach, and one of Brahms’s Hungarian Dances performed on the xylo-

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43 “Park Band to Lead Community Singing,” *The Baltimore Sun*, April 17, 1915, 16.

44 Ibid., 16. The idea that there exists a body of songs that “everyone ought to know” is repeated within the *Baltimore Sun* article.

45 The program was repeated later that week in Carroll Park (“Park Music Next Sunday,” *The Baltimore Sun*, May 9, 1915, 10).

phone.<sup>46</sup> The enthusiastic crowd was estimated at over 2,000. The *Sun* reported that audience participation was not limited to the official community singing numbers: “Every time a popular encore was played the thousands swung their voices into the melodies.”<sup>47</sup>

Frederick R. Huber, Municipal Director of Music in Baltimore, gave voice to a popular 1916 sentiment when he stated, “There is no custom more conducive to the cultivation of civic pride and patriotism than community singing.”<sup>48</sup> In this speech, he compared the American tradition of community singing with that of Germany—to Germany’s advantage. Huber lamented the fact that Germany’s vibrant tradition of public singing was superior to that of the United States, and he predicted that this would work to Germany’s advantage on the global stage. One year later, the United States would declare war on Germany and put Huber’s theory to the test.

To study the development of community singing during the Great War we will leave Baltimore behind and shift to another example: Atlanta, where the practice was particularly well-documented by *The Atlanta Constitution*.<sup>49</sup> The men and women who organized wartime community singing remained enthusiastic about its role in cultural development, but their reigning ambition was to promote patriotic devotion among citizens and off-duty soldiers. Shortly after the Great War had concluded, the female columnist who wrote “From A Woman’s Point of View” for the *Constitution* described the power of community singing as follows: “During the period of the war there was no movement which proved to be a more popular influence for disseminating a general patriotism among all kinds of people than that of community

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46 “Community Singing Tonight,” *The Baltimore Sun*, May 18, 1915, 5.

47 “Community Singing Hearty,” *The Baltimore Sun*, May 19, 1915, 14.

48 “Community Singing,” *The Baltimore Sun*, July 23, 1916, MF8.

49 This case study of community singing in Atlanta will serve to represent the practice as a whole. The community singing movement was too large and diverse for any generalizations to be made about it. For the purposes of introduction, it is best to examine a single instance.

singing.”<sup>50</sup> It is no coincidence that it was a female writer who was authorized to comment on the subject of community singing. Even when men affiliated with the military planned and directed community singing events, women were expected to promote their efforts through supportive publicity.

The community singing in Atlanta was initially planned as entertainment for off-duty soldiers who came into the city on Sundays from Camp Gordon and Fort McPherson. In order to “give the men real enjoyment and put new life and spirit into them,” the Atlanta War Camp Community Service organized a program of entertainment to run from 2:30 to 10 pm each Sunday at the municipal Auditorium. These winter programs opened with a popular organ concert and consisted primarily of films. As such, they bore a close resemblance to what would be offered in the picture-palace shows of the next decade. The community singing, which followed the organ music, was directed by Warren Kimsey, the song leader at Camp Gordon, who led the assembled soldiers and citizens in patriotic songs, marching tunes, and old favorites.<sup>51</sup>

When summer arrived, the War Camp Community Service moved their popular community singing program outdoors. As in Baltimore and other cities, community singing was finding a welcome home in public parks. The sings, now divorced from the program of organ music and films, were offered each Sunday afternoon in Grant Park. Additional entertainment, including a two-hour band concert before the sing, was later added, but community singing had established itself as a stand-alone activity that could draw crowds.<sup>52</sup> The move outdoors had little influence on the sings themselves. The repertoire remained the same, although “the latest popular num-

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50 Isma Dooly, “Community Singing and Pageantry,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 12, 1919, 11.

51 “Plan to Entertain Soldiers Sunday,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 25, 1917, 14.

52 “Kimsey to Conduct Community Singing in Open Air Sunday,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 26, 1918, 9.

bers” were added to the program,<sup>53</sup> and Warren Kimsey continued to lead the singing until he was replaced at Camp Gordon by Loren G. Jones. The *Constitution* estimated a crowd of 3,000 at the first Grant Park sing.<sup>54</sup> These events were so successful—soon drawing crowds up to 5,000—that a second series was inaugurated at Piedmont Park under the direction of Reese F. Veatch, the song leader at Camp Shelby.<sup>55</sup>

In 1918, upon observing that community singing was becoming a national obsession, the *Constitution* offered a theory to describe its sudden popularity: “The need for singing in the army, to keep up the morale and to maintain spirits during the long grind, is being transferred to civilian life, where the necessity for patriotic expression is growing keener.”<sup>56</sup> Group singing was not a new practice in the military, but during the Great War it spread throughout the civilian population. This process was aided by military song leaders, such as Kimsey, and community organizers who endorsed the practice of public singing to achieve patriotic, social, or musical ends. Women continued to play an important role in the wartime community singing movement. Mrs. Armand Carroll (Figure 1.3), state chairman for community music in Georgia, organized the spread of community singing throughout her state, and she was joined by women at the local level who were equally enthusiastic about the use of voices to win the war. She and other organizers also appealed to Georgia’s musicians to become involved, with the promise that greater interest in an appropriately respectable style of music would profit them in the long run.<sup>57</sup>

This promise was kept. Once the war had dissipated, members of the music industry quickly commandeered the practice of community singing. In order to cap-

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53 “Community Singing on Grant Park Lawn Planned for Summer,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 23, 1918, 12.

54 “3,000 Atlanta People Take Part on Sunday in Community Singing,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 27, 1918, 8.

55 “Community Singing Today at Piedmont and at Grant Park,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 14, 1918, B8.

56 *Ibid.*, B8.

57 “Community Singing,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 28, 1918, B9.

## Plans Community Singing



MRS. ARMAND CARROL.

**Figure 1.3:** This photograph of Mrs. Armand Carrol was published in the *Atlanta Constitution* on November 17, 1918.



italize on the sudden resurgence of popular interest in musical performance, music tradespeople—now organized as the National Bureau for the Advancement of Music<sup>58</sup>—began to advocate for a “National Music Week,” intended to promote music literacy and familiarize the public with musical instruments.<sup>59</sup> While various activities were slated, “Music Week” was to rely first and foremost on public community singing. In 1917, *The Music Trade Review* described the goal of “Music Week” as follows: “It may not result, of course, in people dropping other pursuits and rushing into piano or music stores to purchase, but it will turn their minds towards music, and having accomplished that much, open a way for musical instrument purchases in the future.”<sup>60</sup> This transformation of the community singing movement foreshadowed the development of picture-palace community singing of the next decade: while first introduced as entertainment, organist-led singing was quickly co-opted by music publishers who saw an opportunity to plug their songs.

“National Music Week” did not become a reality until 1924, but localized “Music Week” celebrations took place across the country as early as 1919.<sup>61</sup> During these events, community singing migrated once again, this time from the public parks into places of learning and commercial activity. In an Arkansas-wide “Music Week” of 1920, “More than 10,000 persons attended twenty-one sings... in schools, clubs,

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58 The Bureau was an agency of the National Piano Manufacturers Association and the Music Industries Chamber of Commerce (Franklin W. Koch, “Cooperative Promotional Efforts of the Music Supervisors National Conference and the National Bureau for the Advancement of Music,” *Journal of Research in Music Education*, Winter 1990, 269).

59 The “week” idea, in which an entire week was dedicated, on a national scale, to the pursuit of a single task, emerged during the Great War. “Weeks” dedicated to the Red Cross, to the YMCA, and to various drives mobilized the population behind the war effort. The “week” idea persisted after the War, when it was often employed by “organizations that have some interest to promote or by individuals who have something to sell” (C.M. Tremaine, *The History of National Music Week* (New York: National Bureau for the Advancement of Music, 1925), 12).

60 “Editorial,” *The Music Trade Review*, February 24, 1917, 22. This editorial dates from before the Great War had concluded, but the music tradespeople did not act on this idea until 1919.

61 “Wisconsin Association of Music Industries Meets,” *The Music Trade Review*, September 20, 1919, 23.

industrial plants, department stores and theatres.”<sup>62</sup> Organizers in Little Rock brought community singing into churches, public and private schools, theaters, restaurants, cafes, the State Capitol Building, and Liberty Hall. Special sings were conducted for industrial workers, business men, school children, and, as a separate group, “negro” children. “In this way,” wrote the *Review* columnist, “practically everybody in the city will be reached.”<sup>63</sup>

During the 1920s, community singing also became a part of American culture through other channels. Service clubs, such as the Rotary, integrated community singing—of “good, honest-to-heaven, he-man songs, with good melodies and worthwhile words”<sup>64</sup>—into their activities. Rotary leaders pointed out that they abhorred song parodies, in which comical lyrics were attached to familiar melodies, even though these were popular at camps and parties, as well as in the picture theater.<sup>65</sup> Community singing was also introduced into workplaces—especially into department stores, factories, and mining camps—as a regular exercise, where it was believed to act as “a safety valve for the release of social unrest and economic discontent.”<sup>66</sup> Once again, the emphasis was placed on the salutary or therapeutic aims of group singing.

The “safety valve” issue stood at the heart of escapist picture-palace entertainment, in which the organist combined elements from a number of community singing traditions. Sometimes the organist invoked a Rotarian sense of camaraderie, and sometimes he created the atmosphere of a college party. He might select traditional repertoire, or rely on side-splitting parodies. With every performance, however, the

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62 “Music Campaign in Arkansas Starts Auspiciously,” *The Music Trade Review*, October 9, 1920, 5.

63 These efforts were not philanthropic. The columnist concludes, “It is expected that the Music Week program will prove a great factor not only in stimulating musical interest generally, but in bringing about increased sales of musical instruments” (“Great Music Week Celebration in Little Rock,” *The Music Trade Review*, November 27, 1920, 29).

64 Frederick W. Carberry, “‘All Ready? Let’s Go!’: Singing in Rotary,” *The Rotarian*, August 1925, 25.

65 E.O. Harbin, *Parodology* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1928), 5.

66 Archibald T. Davison, “Good Music for Community Singing,” *The Playground*, April 1922, 455.

theater organist distracted his patrons from their daily concerns. Ben Hall evocatively describes the role that picture palaces played in the lives of urban Americans:

The people loved it. After all, it was for them that this sumptuous and magic world was built, and they thoroughly enjoyed being spoiled by indulgent impresarios. Ladies from cold-water flats could drop in at the movie palace after a tough day in the bargain basements and become queens to command. Budgets and bunions were forgotten as noses were powdered in *boîtes de poudre* worthy of the Pompadour. From a telephone booth disguised as a sedan chair, Mama could call home and say she's be a little late and don't let the stew boil over.<sup>67</sup>

The picture palace allowed lower- and middle-class patrons to imagine that they were better off than they were. In this way, the palace system pre-empted any social unrest that might have arisen between the starkly divided haves and have-nots of the 1920s.

## Sources

This study relies almost entirely on material culled from reports in the national film-trade press: a collection of journals in which exhibitors and other trade professionals recorded ideas, opinions, and experiences for an audience of their peers. The four journals which most regularly described the practice of community singing, either as directed by organists or by films, were *Variety*, *Exhibitors Herald*, *Motion Picture News*, and *Film Daily*. Those sources lie at the heart of this study.

*Variety* is of course a well-known source to scholars of popular American music in the twentieth century. The journal, still prominent today, was founded in New York City in 1905 as a weekly. *Variety* initially covered the vaudeville trade, but quickly expanded to incorporate other forms of popular entertainment. In the 1920s, *Variety* contributors published on the topics of vaudeville, legitimate theater, films, picture house presentations, radio, cabaret, night clubs, recorded music, and outdoor performances. The sections dedicated to each of these subjects were regularly reordered

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<sup>67</sup> Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats*, 17.

according to the level of public interest. The attention that *Variety* paid to motion-picture entertainment in the late 1920s reflected that medium's growing popularity and importance. Over the course of several years, the space that *Variety* dedicated to the review of films and stage shows steadily increased, while the "Pictures" section moved closer and closer to the front of the journal.

Two columns in the "Pictures" section of *Variety* are of special importance in this study. The first is "House Reviews" (later called "Film House Reviews" and, in the mid-1930s, "Variety House Reviews," to reflect that fact that most theaters of that era only offered pictures). This column reviewed all of the live entertainment that took place in nationally important theaters each week, including the organ presentation and any community singing contained therein. The second is "Presentations" (later called "New Acts"). This column highlighted notable stage acts and described them in greater detail than was allowed in "House Reviews." Exceptional organ solos were sometimes selected for this column, such as Jesse Crawford's much-anticipated first appearance in November 1926 at the magnificent New York Paramount. In addition to these weekly review columns, *Variety* published a large number of articles on the topic of organ music in theaters, many of which described the related practice of community singing.

*Exhibitors Herald*, also based in New York City, plays the most important role in this study. Founded in 1915, the *Herald* published weekly articles, reviews, and commentaries concerning all aspects of film exhibition. The *Herald* underwent a series of name changes during the period in question. In 1927 it merged with *The Moving Picture World*—the most important trade journal of the nickelodeon era—and became *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World* (later shortened to *Exhibitors Herald World*). In 1931, the *Herald* acquired *Motion Picture News* and was reborn as the *Motion Picture Herald*.<sup>68</sup> This trade journal, in all of its permutations, is referred to as the

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68 Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 197.

*Herald* in this study.

Despite these transformations, the format of the *Herald* did not change significantly. Its articles and reviews were contributed by the *Herald* staff and by trade professionals, including organists. The journal was read by theater managers, organists, and other members of the film-exhibition industry. While the *Herald* addressed all aspects of film exhibition, the regular sections concerned with music—"Music in the Theatre," "Presentation Acts," and later, "Music and Talent"—are naturally of the greatest relevance here. The weekly column "Organ Solos," inaugurated in 1927, provided reviews of organ presentations offered in major theaters across the country. Since it contains almost all of the extant information about the contents and presentation of organ solos, this column is vital to any study of organist-led community singing.

Two additional film-trade journals factor prominently in this study. *Motion Picture News*, founded in 1913 and absorbed by the *Herald* in 1931, published short articles and film reviews on a weekly basis. The *News* included more exhibitor-contributed content than the other journals and emphasized management techniques—many of which concerned the use of music—that were meant to attract the crowds.<sup>69</sup> This content was published in a special section known in the mid-1920s as "Your Idea and Ours," later replaced by "Managers' Round Table Club." These sections contain most of the available information about community singing and other musical entertainment offered during children's shows.

Finally, *Film Daily* (launched as *Wid's Films and Film Folks* in 1915) published short articles and reviews on a daily basis.<sup>70</sup> This journal reviewed many of the sing-along short films, and each Sunday *Film Daily* published reviews of presentation acts at the major theaters in New York City. While the scope of information on community

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 195, 197.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 197.

singing is extremely limited, *Film Daily* provides a corroborating source for accounts of several important houses.

One additional source for this study is *The American Organist*, the journal of the American Guild of Organists. This monthly publication offers a striking contrast to the trade journals. The articles are long, jargon-free, and targeted at an audience of those organists who were offering “high-class” entertainment. Perhaps not surprisingly, these articles adopt a generally defensive tone. Authors who published in the “Photoplaying” section of *The American Organist* regularly sought to legitimize the theater organ in the eyes of their colleagues. There is only minimal discussion of community singing, and the “Photoplaying” section was discontinued in 1930 with the spread of talking pictures.

This dissertation also engages with some non-traditional sources. I have learned a great deal about community singing repertoire and practice from lantern-slide collections. I have visited the MarNan Collection in Minneapolis, MN, and the Atlanta Fox Theatre Archives in Atlanta, GA, where I spent two weeks examining thousands of slides. I have also worked with digital collections of slide images that belong to the George Eastman House in Rochester, NY, and the Embassy Theatre in Fort Wayne, IN. These slides enable a variety of insights into the community singing experience. In addition to preserving the repertoire, they also testify to the humorous quality of most picture-palace sings. Alterations made by organists indicate the level of control these musicians exercised in the theater, even when the slides were supplied in complete sets by music publishers. And singing instructions incorporated into the slides help to recreate the perspective of a 1920s participant.

Another source for this dissertation—even more ephemeral than the lantern slides, most of which are lost—has been the diverse library of community singing books published during the 'teens, '20s, and '30s. These volumes range from hard-bound keepsakes to cheaply produced promotional giveaways, but they all reflect

the enthusiasm for community singing that gripped Americans in these years. Like slides, these song books indicate what repertoire was popular. Unlike slides, though, they often indicate who consumed that repertoire. In addition, song books sometimes contain prefaces that extol the power and importance of community singing. These texts, which attempt to explain the ideals and beliefs that motivated the community singing movement, have been invaluable for me as I try to understand what community singing meant for Americans in these years.

## CHAPTER 2

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# A VISIT TO THE ORIENTAL

**W**HILE OUR MAIN TOPIC is the community sing, it is helpful initially to devote some time to the environment in which those sings took place. Within picture palaces of the 1920s and '30s, such sings were led by a theater organist as part of what was called the “organ solo.” Because the leading film-trade journal reviewed these community sings in a dedicated “Organ Solos” column it is easy to imagine them in isolation from the remainder of the entertainment, but to do so is a mistake. Motion-picture exhibitors carefully formulated each program to attract new patrons and to satisfy regulars, and the organ solo always reflected the theater’s character. The most important element in the community sing was the audience—an audience that was attracted both by the varied offerings and by the ambiance of the theater itself. We need to know who these patrons were and why they flocked to the movie theater, all of which we can learn through a study of the program as a whole and an examination of the broader principles of picture-palace operation.

The picture-palace program was long and highly varied, and a given theater usually emphasized one of its elements above the others in order to best target a specific segment of the patronage. In some cases the organist and organ-led community sing were the primary draw, but even then the organ solo occupied no more than fifteen minutes of the show. As a result, the organ solo was often a secondary offering. When the organist was not the main attraction, the emphasis usually fell on a charismatic



master of ceremonies, a lavish stage show, or the feature film. Many theaters combined several strong elements while playing down a deficiency. For example, one house might attract the audience with a star organist and big-name visiting performers but hope that a weak feature film would go unnoticed. Less dominant items could also draw patrons. The newsreel, for instance, became an important attraction when Fox began issuing their popular sound news shorts in 1927.<sup>1</sup> The serial short film also developed a loyal weekly patronage.<sup>2</sup>

Each theater exploited its strengths to bring in the customers, and each patron in turn had her own reason for visiting the picture palace. Few patrons were interested in only a single element of the program, but they were not indifferent to the strengths of each theater. Therefore, a patron was likely to seek out a theater that focused on the types of entertainment that she was most interested in. Alternatively, a patron might develop interests based on what the local theater offered. Either way, we can make inferences about the audience that visited each individual palace based on the reputation of the theater and its location in the city. (Location suggested a theater's class and determined whether the audience was entirely local or populated with visitors.)<sup>3</sup> We must examine all of a theater's offerings to understand what attracted the audience and what the audience expected from their experience. This in turn can allow us to determine what role the organ solo played in this or that theater and how the organ solo was perceived and enjoyed by the patrons.

The role of the organist varied enormously from venue to venue, but we can never isolate the organ solo from the nature of the theater and the totality of that theater's

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1 Douglas Gomery, "The Coming of Sound to the American Cinema" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1975), 181-3.

2 Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 164-6.

3 I explore the role of location as a class determinant in Chapter 4. I discuss the different audiences attracted by neighborhood and downtown theaters in Chapter 5.

offerings. The organ solo was never enjoyed as an independent act.<sup>4</sup> Even if a patron greatly enjoyed the community sing, he most likely attended the theater to see another live act or the feature film. Additionally, a patron expected a complete and varied program, and he would leave the theater disappointed if the organ solo were missing. We must remember that the audience for the organ solo was also the audience for the orchestral overture, the stage band, the live prologue, and the comedy shorts. Each element of the program provided patrons with a different flavor of entertainment, but it was only the complete show that could satisfy their desire for fantasy and escape.

The best way to understand picture-palace entertainment is to recreate an instance of it. This chapter will introduce the reader to a single show at a specific theater in order to reconstruct the moviegoing experience of the palace era. Because Chicago was both the locus of organist-led community singing and the home of the most important picture-palace chain, we shall look at a program at a major Chicago theater, the Oriental. The date of the show—October 18, 1927—falls at the height of silent-era picture-palace culture, just before the introduction of sound and the Great Depression were to effect enormous changes on film exhibition. But to begin we must first consider picture-palace exhibition itself.

## Balaban & Katz and Picture-Palace Exhibition

We cannot claim that the Oriental was a *typical* picture palace, because there never was such a thing. Each theater met the needs of its patrons as best it could, given the specific circumstances of location and ownership. However, the Oriental did represent a highly influential approach to film exhibition. This approach was developed in the 1920s by Barney and A.J. Balaban and Samuel Katz, who founded the exhibition chain Balaban & Katz and eventually merged with Paramount to gain nationwide control

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<sup>4</sup> In later years, the organ solo in some theaters was occasionally broadcast as an independent radio program.

over exhibition practices.<sup>5</sup> The B & K style was maximally invested in live performance, stage spectacle, and captivating theater personalities. Any show of theirs provides us with an interesting case study for the role of live performance. The Oriental program on October 18, 1927, also featured an influential theater organist who made his name through community singing, Henri A. Keates. While Keates's organ programs are fascinating on their own terms, it is more informative to observe the organist and his community sings within the highly varied and charismatic world of palace-style exhibition. In 1927 the Oriental theater represented the pinnacle of palace architecture and programming in Chicago, the apex of an exhibition system that had been developing for the past decade. To properly situate a show at the Oriental in Chicago's moviegoing culture, however, we must begin with the story of Balaban & Katz, the Chicago film exhibitors who joined the industry late but eventually set the standard for picture-palace operation.<sup>6</sup>

The first innovation that Balaban & Katz brought to the picture-palace industry had to do with location and was designed to cater directly to the middle-class audience that they—and all motion-picture exhibitors—hoped to entice. The entire palace industry was built on the prospect of making motion-picture entertainment palatable to middle-class patrons. Early exhibitors noticed that while members of the middle class were certainly interested in film, these potential customers were loathe to admit that they patronized the often-dingy, working-class nickelodeons.<sup>7</sup> The first New York palace was built with the idea that middle-class patrons would be attracted to a luxurious theater that offered a high standard of service. The palace experience was meant to be much more sophisticated on every level than that offered

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5 Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 55.

6 *Ibid.*, 41.

7 Russell Merritt, "The Nickelodeon Theater, 1905–1914: Building an audience for the movies," in *Exhibition, the Film Reader*, edited by Ina Rae Hark (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 25–7.

by the nickelodeon.<sup>8</sup> When the Balaban brothers and Samuel Katz made plans to open their first picture palace, the Central Park, on October 27, 1917, they observed that the construction of a mass-transit system in Chicago had produced suburbs on the outskirts of the city and that most of the city's middle-class residents had moved away from the city center. Instead of building their palace in the downtown entertainment district, therefore, Balaban & Katz selected a location in the West end, where their target audience lived. The exhibitors wagered that a neighborhood theater designed and intended for the exclusive use of Chicago's middle-class residents would eliminate the stigma of moviegoing and attract the crowds. Their experiment was wildly successful, and it laid the foundation for a Chicago picture-palace empire that would change the future of the industry. Balaban & Katz built their next three palaces in middle-class suburbs before finally constructing in Chicago's downtown, the area where the Oriental would eventually open.<sup>9</sup>

Location played an important role in the exhibitors' early success, but over time it was the impeccable service and lavish stage shows that came to characterize B&K theaters, and it was these elements that had the greatest impact on picture-palace culture outside of Chicago. We shall begin by examining an element less central to this study: the service. A Balaban & Katz palace was heavily staffed with uniformed attendants, from the ticket girl to the doorman to the elevator operator. The head office mandated the qualifications, training, and appearance of those employed at B&K theaters (for example, an usher had to be a white, college-aged man of average height and weight, while a page boy had to be a young African American male of small stature). This expertly tailored service staff was tasked with making the patron feel wealthy and important, as if he were staying in an upscale New York hotel or visiting European royalty. Middle-class Chicagoans were not used to such treatment, and the

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8 Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907–1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 121–3.

9 Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 44–5.

staff at a picture palace gave them a taste of the service that the wealthy enjoyed every day—at least in the middle-class imagination, if not in reality.<sup>10</sup>

The most important Balaban & Katz service-staff members were the ushers. Balaban & Katz detailed the selection and training of these young men in an advertisement featured in the house magazine.<sup>11</sup> From the text of the notice we learn three important things. First, ushers always came from good families, had “the advantages of good breeding,” and had at least a high-school education. (Most were enrolled in college.) Second, ushers were chosen with the same discernment as a member of the armed forces and were trained by a West Point graduate, which explained their military-like precision and loyalty. And third, ushers were to learn “discipline, service and self-restraint” at the Balaban & Katz School for Ushers before entering service in a theater. Finally, the advertisement noted that the ushers were the only members of the theater organization who come into direct contact with patrons on a daily basis. Because of this, they were the public face of Balaban & Katz and were directly responsible for leaving a good impression on the visitors. All of this led the notice to conclude that the importance of properly training ushers “*cannot be overestimated*” [emphasis in original]. The ushers were indispensable to Balaban & Katz in their effort to create a luxury environment and to secure regular middle-class patrons.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the greatest luxury that a B&K palace offered was surprisingly mundane: air conditioning. This feature is ubiquitous to most buildings today, but in the 1920s it was a valuable selling point. When Balaban & Katz installed air conditioning in their theaters, they not only attracted patrons but transformed the role of the picture palace in society. Before Balaban & Katz, it had been unbearable to attend the movies when the weather was hot, and most theaters simply closed down in the summer. Barney

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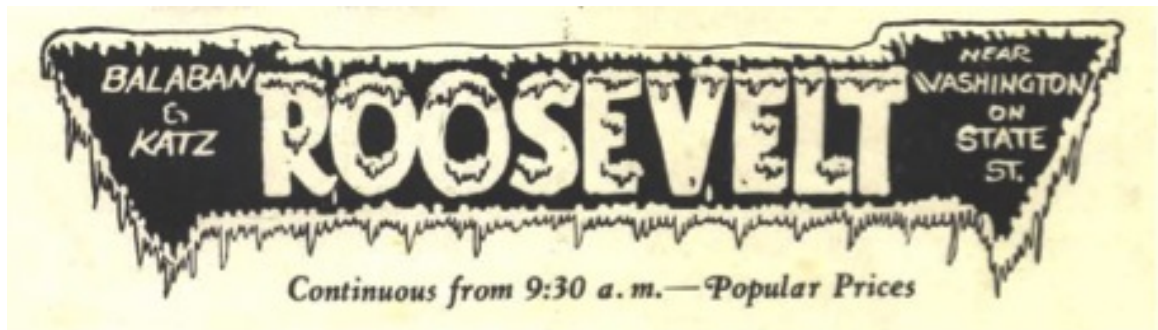
<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 49-50.

<sup>11</sup> This advertisement did not seek to recruit ushers. Instead, it boasted about their sophistication in order to illustrate the high quality of the B&K organization.

<sup>12</sup> David Balaban, *The Chicago Movie Palaces of Balaban and Katz* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), 45.

Balaban, who had worked for the Western Cold Storage Company before joining his brothers as an exhibition entrepreneur, developed an affordable and efficient cooling system for the first theater built by Balaban & Katz, the Central Park. This enormous system, which occupied an entire room beneath the auditorium, made the Central Park the first air-conditioned theater in the world.

Balaban & Katz continued to refine and improve the system with each theater that they built, but what they did with the *notion* of air conditioning was much more impressive. First, without any additional effort, they were able to capitalize on the ability to stay open for business twelve months a year. Instead of repelling patrons in the summer, the theater became a destination for anyone who wished to cool down. Second, Balaban & Katz chose to feature air conditioning in their advertisements. Most middle-class Chicagoans did not have regular access to air-conditioned spaces, which meant that air-conditioning was more than just a way to cool down: it was an enviable luxury reserved for the well-off. Air conditioning may have been a practical feature in Balaban & Katz houses, but it also represented the lifestyle of the upper class, along with the gilded décor and uniformed staff. (Whether or not the upper class regularly enjoyed these things is not important; B&K only needed to sell the perception of privilege.) To draw attention to this new luxury, Balaban & Katz framed advertisements for their theaters with icicles, a striking graphic representation of the pleasures on offer (Figure 2.1). They also accompanied these images with descriptions of the delightful climate within, and advertised their palaces as the number-one destination to escape summer heat. Finally, Balaban & Katz met with a bit of luck (perhaps engineered, although we cannot know). The Public Health Commissioner of Chicago announced that Balaban & Katz theaters had the cleanest air one could find and suggested that all those suffering from lung troubles, as well as pregnant women, spend a considerable amount of time in these air-conditioned havens. In the end, what had been a comfort and luxury was transformed into a health imperative,



**Figure 2.1:** This advertisement for another Balaban & Katz theater appeared in the August 1925 issue of *Balaban & Katz Magazine*. The icicles reminded the reader that every B&K theater boasted the ultimate luxury: air conditioning. This visual gimmick was ubiquitous to B&K advertising throughout the 1920s.

and theater attendance became not a delight but a necessity. Balaban & Katz profited enormously from all of this advertising.<sup>13</sup>

While the service and climate at a B&K theater helped to maintain a regular and dedicated patronage, it was the show that ultimately attracted an audience. The Balaban & Katz formula for stage entertainment eventually influenced the entire industry, but it had grown out of necessity. As fledgling exhibitors, Balaban & Katz needed to offer entertainment that would draw the crowds. They faced a serious problem, however, due to the way in which the motion-picture industry was organized until 1948.<sup>14</sup> Along with the picture-palace era came the vertical integration of the motion-picture industry, in which a single company produced, distributed, and exhibited films. This allowed each film company to maximize profits by controlling all of the steps in the process and monopolizing the entertainment market wherever possible. Film-production companies integrated vertically by acquiring theaters in which to exhibit their films, while at the same time powerful theater-owners acquired production companies to supply their own demand for films. Warner Brothers followed the former strategy in the late 1920s, when their success with sound films allowed them to expand into exhibition and corner the market in certain regions.<sup>15</sup> Marcus Loew, on the other hand, developed the production company Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in the 1920s to supply films to his chain of theaters and to avoid costly dependence on other producers.<sup>16</sup> Film-production companies of the 1920s granted initial access to films, or “first run” privileges, to their own theaters. After the first (and most profitable) run was complete and the film had been shelved for some months, it would be made available to the theaters affiliated with other production companies and to

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<sup>13</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 53-54.

<sup>14</sup> In this year, the antitrust lawsuit “United States v. Paramount Pictures” was brought before the Supreme Court. The verdict concluded that vertical organization within the motion picture industry constituted an illegal trust.

<sup>15</sup> Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 89-90.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-3.



independent theaters. Not even the vertically integrated film giants could produce enough material to satisfy the demand for weekly changes, so all of the theaters relied to a certain extent on outside product.<sup>17</sup> Because the Balaban & Katz chain was not initially affiliated with a production company, however, it never had access to first-run films, and could not rely on feature exhibition to attract patrons. Instead, B&K heavily promoted live entertainment and invested into bringing the best theater talent to Chicago.<sup>18</sup>

Live entertainment, then, was the most important part of a Balaban & Katz show, and the performers who provided it were selected to fill four different roles, each of which was required to make any show complete. Every performance at a B&K house featured a charismatic band leader and master of ceremonies, who chatted with the audience and linked acts together; an organist, who offered a solo in addition to incidental music; visiting “name” performers who were featured in advertising and attracted patrons during a contractual stay of a week or more; and resident performers, both singers and dancers, who often appeared in conjunction with other acts and built up the climactic points in the stage show. While visiting stars were important to picture-palace success, the central Balaban & Katz strategy was to acquire the most promising stage talent for their theaters and then to build that talent to celebrity status through incessant promotion. Their two greatest success stories were the organist Jesse Crawford, for whom Chicago mourned when he left in 1926 to take up a prestigious position at the New York Paramount, and Paul Ash, a band leader whose celebrity was so great that his signature stage-show style was termed “the Ash policy” and imitated throughout the nation.<sup>19</sup> We can see an example of the B&K attitude towards live entertainment in the Oriental theater’s opening-night marquee. On it,

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17 Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 7.

18 Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 50–53.

19 A. Raymond Gallo, “Ash Policy Has Hold on Theatres,” *Exhibitors Herald*, August 20, 1927, 33.

Paul Ash and organist Henri A. Keates got top billing, while the feature film and its celluloid stars were relegated to second place (Figure 2.2).<sup>20</sup>

Balaban & Katz theaters, as well as most other picture palaces, presented their programs of live and filmed offerings using the model of “continuous performance.” In this system, shows began in the late morning and repeated until around midnight. A single show might last from two to three hours, sixty to 105 minutes of which was dedicated to the feature film. Each show was roughly identical. Certain modules might be absent during slow hours, a module might be cut if the show ran long, or the orchestra might be given a break from accompanying the film, but the key elements (stage show and feature) remained constant.<sup>21</sup> Because the nickelodeon theaters of the 1900s and '10s had not offered a unified show with distinct, ordered parts, patrons were free to arrive and depart whenever they chose—they exercised total power over the length of their stay.<sup>22</sup> The picture palace, however, did offer a unified show, and the management of audience behavior changed accordingly. Here in the palace, the audience was expected to wait in the lobby until the previous show was over, stay for the entire show to which they were admitted, and leave at its conclusion.<sup>23</sup> A palace patron shared a nearly-identical experience with his fellow audience members: each witnessed the same elements of the show in the same order. This, in addition to the charisma of the live performers, allowed a sense of community to develop among theatergoers that had not been possible—at least on such a grand scale—in the nickelodeon.

The tactics employed by Balaban & Katz in their Chicago theaters were designed to achieve the goal shared by every picture-palace impresario: to entice middle-class patrons by providing them with fantasy and escape. The motion picture can provide

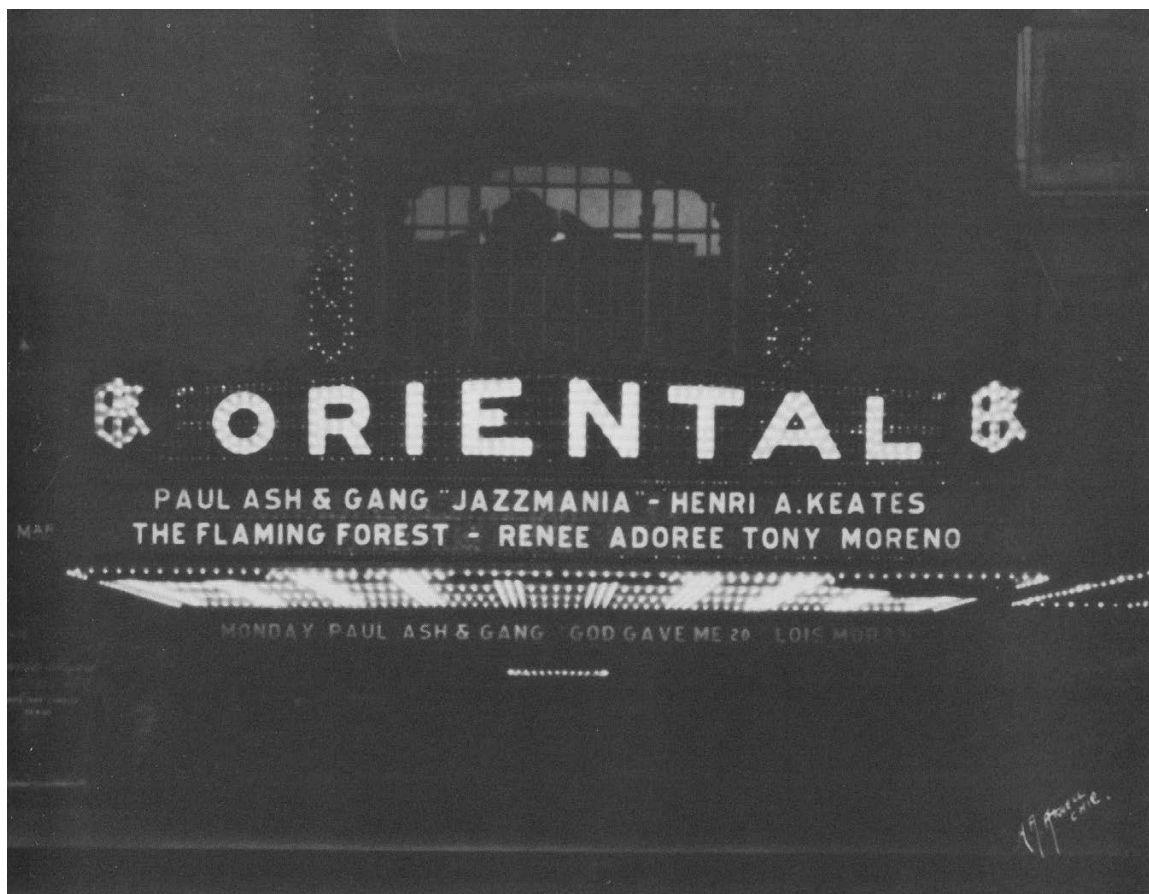
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20 Theatre Historical Society of America, *Oriental Theatre* (Annual No. 24, 1994), 7.

21 D. Balaban, *The Chicago Movie Palaces of Balaban and Katz*, 97.

22 “The Nickelodeon,” *The Moving Picture World*, May 4, 1907, 140.

23 Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 48-9.



**Figure 2.2:** The marquee of the Oriental theater. Courtesy Theatre Historical Society.

imaginative escape (through exotic images) and emotional release (through storytelling) no matter where it is exhibited, but the picture-palace environment was designed to enrich and compound these effects. Each detail of the architecture, decoration, live entertainment, and service was finely tuned to provide the visitors with precisely the brand of escape they desired, and exhibitors realized at once that what the middle-class patrons most wanted was escape from their ordinary lives and social positions. They desired wealth and importance, and they longed to be part of the social elite. To make this fantasy a reality, if only for a few hours, exhibitors often modeled their theaters on European palaces and exclusive New York hotels; they adorned the interiors with fine art and expensive chandeliers; they staged elaborate fantasies of splendor and royalty; and they staffed their palaces with dignified and obsequious servants. The palace was construed as a second home for the middle class. For a fee, any member of that class was invited to enjoy the accoutrements of wealth and status.<sup>24</sup>

## The Oriental Theater in Chicago

The Oriental was a crowning achievement in Balaban & Katz's mission to provide middle-class Chicagoans with an escapist haven. Before the Oriental, the notion of picture-palace "escape" only included the fantasy of living an idealized, upper-class lifestyle. The Oriental, which opened on May 8, 1926, in downtown Chicago, combined class-based escapism with an exotic fantasy world. At the Oriental, patrons might imagine themselves as bejeweled Shahs instead of monocled Rockefellers. Other Eastern-themed theaters would appear in the wake of the Oriental, but the Balaban & Katz behemoth was the first and most prominent.

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<sup>24</sup> Ben Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1961), 16-7.

The Oriental theater was designed to have an extraordinary visual impact on all who visited. The theater still stands today, but to see it now is to witness a dated reminder of a dead past. When the Oriental opened as a picture palace, it represented the future of architecture and motion-picture entertainment. Today we catch a glimpse of the awe that the Oriental inspired when we read contemporary descriptions of the interior and accounts of the effect that the theater had on those who entered.<sup>25</sup> In 1927 the Oriental offered patrons a dazzling vision of an exotic land that, in most cases, they would never visit.

While the Oriental departed from the picture-palace standard in several respects, it was still constrained by the norms of construction and outward appearance. Like most downtown palaces, the Oriental was not a freestanding structure. It was necessary for theater financiers to make efficient use of valuable downtown real estate, so a picture palace often occupied the ground floor of a much larger structure. The Oriental was located in the New Masonic Temple Building (Figure 2.3), designed by the same architects responsible for the theater itself. The façade of the Oriental was much like any other contemporary palace, which perhaps heightened the shocking effect of the aesthetic wonders within. On what was otherwise an unassuming street front, a grand marquee advertised the current offerings, while an enormous vertical sign bearing the name of the theater in bright lights marked it clearly for all to see.<sup>26</sup>

The Oriental was designed by the firm of C.W. & George L. Rapp, architects who rose to great prominence in the picture-palace field through their work for Balaban & Katz. Various accounts of the architects' complex relationship with the theater tell us a great deal about the aesthetic effect that the Oriental had when it opened. At the same time, these accounts are undoubtedly tinged by modern aesthetic sensibilities, which have often been offended by the "hasheesh-dream decor" of the Oriental.<sup>27</sup>

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25 For an example, see: "—and Now It's Oriental," *Exhibitors Herald*, May 15, 1926, 53.

26 Theatre Historical Society, *Oriental Theatre*, 3-6.

27 Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats*, 142.



**Figure 2.3:** The Rapp & Rapp skyscraper which contains the Oriental theater. Courtesy Chicago Architectural Photographing Co. Collection, Theatre Historical Society.

David Balaban, named for his grandfather, reports that Rapp & Rapp were so appalled by the final result of their design that they refused to visit the Oriental after it had opened, an indication that they were either coerced into working on the theater or that something had gone wrong as their plans were being realized.<sup>28</sup> Theater historian David Naylor, in agreement, contributes a rumor that the annoyed architects tore up their complimentary tickets to the opening performance. He describes the theater as “an embarrassment to the firm.”<sup>29</sup> The Theatre Historical Society of America, on the other hand, informs us that the idea for the Oriental came from the architects themselves, and that Rapp & Rapp had to work hard to convince Balaban & Katz that an Eastern-themed theater would be successful. The Historical Society also points out that Rapp & Rapp had the Oriental photographically documented in great detail, an indication that they were not ashamed of their work.<sup>30</sup> It is likely that late 20th-century commentators projected their own distaste for the garish theater onto the architects in a misguided attempt to clear the firm’s name.

The Oriental’s décor set it apart from other Chicago picture palaces, but many of the theater’s architectural features would have been familiar to any moviegoer. Rapp & Rapp had long since perfected their picture-palace technique, and the architects applied the same time-tested principles to each new assignment. For example, early movie theaters were prone to catastrophic fires, due to the dangers of film exhibition combined with poorly-designed exits. In the 1920s, the possibility of a fire breaking out was still a major concern for exhibitors. Additionally, the enormous crowds drawn by the picture-palace show presented new difficulties in crowd control. As they perfected their picture-palace design, Rapp & Rapp put a great deal of thought into how patrons might be gently directed so as to avoid discomfort and panic. To begin

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28 D. Balaban, *The Chicago Movie Palaces of Balaban and Katz*, 62.

29 David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1981), 103.

30 Theatre Historical Society, *Oriental Theatre*, 2-3.

with, the architects provided a large number of exits. They then developed a general floor plan that funneled crowds into and out of the building with maximal efficiency. The center of Rapp & Rapp's crowd-control system was the lobby (Figure 2.4), and the lobby they designed for the Oriental fulfilled two functions: it facilitated the swift exodus of one audience through the side ambulatories while another took their seats, and it could hold as many patrons as could the auditorium.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, when a visitor—even a first-time visitor—arrived at the Oriental on October 18, 1927, he would have realized that crowds extending “out on the sidewalk as far as around the corner”<sup>32</sup> indicated a long wait for admittance. The visitor would have known that an unseen lobby was already full of patrons for the next show.

Upon entering the Oriental, a patron would have been dazzled by the ornate interior. The Eastern decorations clung to every corner of the theater. The ceiling was detailed with molded plaster ornamentation, while friezes and relief carvings (such as the “water bearers” seen in Figure 2.5) lined the walls. Imported Eastern art hung where the walls were unornamented, heavy drapes framed the mezzanine overlooks, and Oriental antiques dotted the walkways. The furniture, which contributed to the comfort and luxury of every picture palace, was also suited to the Eastern theme.<sup>33</sup> The most striking pieces were the massive “elephant thrones” that lined the walls of the foyer and promenade (Figure 2.6).<sup>34</sup> This garish scheme of interior decoration appalled some commentators, but a writer for the film trade journal *Exhibitors Herald* came to the Oriental's defense:

Last Thursday afternoon this writer walked through the then far from completed interior of the Oriental theatre in Chicago. Under the white light of day, amplified by terrific white artificial illumination provided for the hundreds of rushing workmen within, the theatre looked like anything but a beautiful

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 3-6.

<sup>32</sup> Loop, “Oriental (Chicago),” *Variety*, October 26, 1927, 26.

<sup>33</sup> Theatre Historical Society, *Oriental Theatre*, 8-17.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 13.





**Figure 2.4:** The lobby of the Oriental, designed for optimal crowd control. Courtesy Chicago Architectural Photographing Co. Collection, Theatre Historical Society.



**Figure 2.5:** These “water bearers” faced each other across the foyer. Courtesy Chicago Architectural Photographing Co. Collection, Theatre Historical Society.



**Figure 2.6:** The main foyer of the Oriental. Courtesy Chicago Architectural Photographing Co. Collection, Theatre Historical Society.



## Chapter 2. A Visit to the Oriental

interior. The rich paintings, dominated by red and gold, looked trashy. The heavily ornamented furnishings looked expensively cheap. The organ console, done in red and gold, looked like an overgrown music box. Then this writer saw the theatre on Friday night under the correct illumination and full of people. That's different!

The name applies wholly to the theatre. It is Oriental! No other word describes it so well. The "expensive cheapness" was gone entirely. It had become Oriental splendor. The advance advertising of the theatre had termed it a "jewel casket" and that's the phrase that fits it. A minute after coming in from modern Madison street you're in the India you read about when you were a child.<sup>35</sup>

A theater like the Oriental was fantasy, not reality. That fantasy did not withstand close inspection by the jaded professional, but it did not need to. The picture palace was designed as an exotic home-away-from-home to which patrons could escape on a weekly basis. It did not need to be livable or genuine—it simply needed to fulfill the fantasy that patrons were already eager to experience. And the Oriental was very successful in doing so. Visiting the theater not only transported patrons to another world, India, but to another time, that of their childhoods (Figure 2.7).

Many picture palaces of the 1920s imitated specific European structures in order to provide patrons with escape,<sup>36</sup> but Rapp & Rapp took a different approach when they designed the Oriental. In the theater's official press release, Chief of Design Arthur Frederick Adams noted that the Oriental was not intended to emulate any "particular monument from the East," or even to incorporate the designs and motifs that one might associate with Eastern temples and palaces. In fact, Rapp & Rapp did not base their theater on Eastern architecture at all. Instead, the architects modeled it on the Indian Durbar, a festival celebrated three times in Delhi (1877, 1903, and 1911) to celebrate the coronation of British royals. Adams wrote of the architectural vision, "instead of really copying any Oriental art, [Rapp & Rapp] have introduced the spirit of the gorgeous pageant which is theatrical in every detail."<sup>37</sup> Adams's comments help

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35 "—and Now It's Oriental," 53.

36 For example, the first picture palace—the New York City Regent, constructed in 1913—was modelled on Venice's Palace of the Doges (Naylor, 40).

37 Theatre Historical Society, *Oriental Theatre*, 2.



**Figure 2.7:** These details from the auditorium of the Oriental are rendered entirely in painted plaster. Courtesy Chicago Architectural Photographing Co. Collection, Theatre Historical Society.

us to understand the true object behind picture-palace design. Rapp & Rapp chose to base their latest theatrical masterpiece on an event instead of a monument—an event that centered around royalty and fabulous riches, and that reflected the lifestyle of the Western nobility who ruled India, not the natural landscape of that country or the daily existence of its inhabitants. The introduction of Eastern elements added a dimension of cultural escape to a theater experience that had traditionally centered only on class escape.

Even though the Oriental was not designed after a pre-existing monument, its interior was still clearly that of a palace. The Oriental was luxurious *first* and Eastern *second*. Its cavernous waiting areas—like those of all picture palaces—were designed to impress the patrons with high ceilings, glamorous furnishings, and gilded ornaments. The Oriental featured a four-level entrance hall, from which a patron could climb the stairway to the balcony or enter a passageway to the orchestra foyer. Orchestra-level patrons were expected to use the main foyer, while balcony patrons used the mezzanine foyer. Balcony patrons could admire the main hall from the mezzanine, from the additional lower-balcony landing, or from the men's lounge near the mid-balcony foyer.<sup>38</sup>

While these public spaces were designed to exude glamour and opulence, it was the additional private spaces within the theater that provided the service and convenience that the class-attainment fantasy required. All Balaban & Katz houses had smoking rooms and luxurious lounges for men and women, complete with attendants and, occasionally, musical entertainment. Additionally, the theaters provided complimentary professional childcare in a space below the auditorium equipped with complete playground facilities. Moviegoers could leave their children in the care of fully qualified nurses, which meant that women shopping with their families during the day could still attend a Balaban & Katz show.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 8-12.

<sup>39</sup> Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 49.

But apart from these spaces and amenities, it was of course the auditorium itself that was the ultimate destination for every patron, and it was the picture-palace show that had drawn them in the first place. The Eastern fantasy, if more realistic in the public spaces (which might actually be mistaken for rooms in a palace), naturally continued into the theatrical space (Figure 2.8).

Perhaps the first sight to strike a patron upon entering the auditorium of the Oriental was the 4,000 square-foot stage curtain. This monumental piece featured a victorious Indian rajah returning from battle and was painted in Japanese metallic pigments on velour in the Balaban & Katz scenic shops. Because the focus of the audience had to shift between films and live performers, the curtain played a special role in the picture-palace show. For the first portion of an Oriental show, the curtain would remain down so as to draw attention to the musicians. Later, the curtain would rise to reveal an elaborate stage set, and stage performers would share the focus with the musicians. A screen for film projection would move into place when it was time to exhibit shorts or run the feature. The position of the curtain indicated where the patron was to direct his attention, and the striking appearance of the Oriental's curtain contributed an exotic flavor to the show whenever it was in place.<sup>40</sup>

The spaces surrounding the stage and its curtain were primarily dedicated to musical concerns. Next to the stage, the side wall was dominated, as in all picture palaces, by the organ opening (seen in Figure 2.8 to either side of the stage curtain). It was the custom of Rapp & Rapp to hang draperies from a plaster arch over the opening, which served to reduce the overwhelming power of the instrument.<sup>41</sup> In front of the stage was the orchestra pit. An orchestra pit was a natural feature for any theater that utilized stage entertainment, but because of their varied offerings, picture palaces had unique requirements for their musicians. Shortly before the

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<sup>40</sup> Theatre Historical Society, *Oriental Theatre*, 19.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.



**Figure 2.8:** The auditorium of the Oriental. Courtesy Chicago Architectural Photographing Co. Collection, Theatre Historical Society.



construction of the Oriental, theater designers had developed a special approach to pit design that better suited the needs of motion-picture exhibition. In the Oriental, the conductor, orchestra, piano, and organ console were each located on separate lifts within the pit. With this system in place, the conductor and orchestra could be elevated for the overture, the pianist could be brought into place to accompany a stage act, the organist could be revealed for the organ solo, and then, when it was time for the feature film, all of the musicians could be easily removed from view.<sup>42</sup> (The organist and orchestra were both expected to accompany the film, but they could not be allowed to distract from it.) In addition, the stage band was situated on a platform that rolled onto the stage from the raised orchestra lift. This meant that the band could move into place quickly for the show and then disappear into the pit without any disturbance.<sup>43</sup> These elaborate contrivances emphasize the importance of live music during the course of a presentation. The musicians were a significant draw for the theater, and it was important that they be visible during musical features. The Oriental auditorium was designed with careful consideration for the needs of live performers.

The stage, like the pit, was also highly mechanized, a moving wonder that was a draw when the Oriental first opened. The theater featured “flying stages,” an improvement on a preexisting modular stage design that provided new options for the presentation of live entertainment and allowed for quicker scene changes.<sup>44</sup> This architectural emphasis on stage presentation illustrates the important role that live acts played at the Oriental.<sup>45</sup> The wonderful new stages could be leveraged as an advertising ploy only because the presentation of live entertainment was vital to the show. Additionally, they remind us that technological advances in the movie theater

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>44</sup> “Magic of Partington’s Flying Stages Explained,” *Exhibitors Herald*, August 7, 1926, 14.

<sup>45</sup> “New Policy Framed for McVickers,” *Exhibitors Herald*, May 8, 1926, 114, 118.

were not limited to recorded sound and colored films. Film exhibitors worked constantly to improve the show, and their efforts produced innovations which ranged from lifts to spill cards (an ingenious method for counting patrons) to air conditioning.<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, the flying stages presented one more opportunity for technical malfunction—they broke down on opening night and band leader Paul Ash had to entertain the crowd while the sets were slowly moved into place. It was reported that his “ready wit supplied his nimble tongue with nifties that got him out of these bunkers with the giggles all on his side of the scorecard.”<sup>47</sup>

The auditorium of the Oriental, as in all picture palaces, was carefully designed so that every seat provided a clear view of the stage and screen, without interference from columns (Figure 2.9). Live entertainment played a major role in the picture-palace show, but it consisted largely of singing, dancing, and production numbers, not acting as one might see in a stage play. This meant that the auditorium could be tailored for film viewing in ways that provided an advantage over traditional theaters. In the case of a play, it is vital that each member of the audience hear the spoken dialogue and see the details of the actors’ movements and facial expressions. Therefore, no seat can be positioned too far away from the stage if its occupant is to enjoy the show. In the picture palace, however, both of these concerns evaporated: a patron could easily discern facial expressions and movements because they were emphasized by the camera and enlarged on the screen, and silent films meant that audibility was not an issue. Film exhibitors soon realized that they could capitalize on the nature of their medium and created enormous auditoriums with seats fanning out away from the stage instead of stacking up to be near it. This allowed picture palaces to accommodate the maximum number of patrons without sacrificing comfort—and

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46 Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 49, 53-54.

47 “Pre-Opening Old Master’s Day of Days,” *Exhibitors Herald*, May 15, 1926, 122.



**Figure 2.9:** Seating in the auditorium of the Oriental. Courtesy Chicago Architectural Photographing Co. Collection, Theatre Historical Society.

comfort, of course, was vital to the luxurious escape that a picture palace promised.<sup>48</sup> The seats in the Oriental were organized into an orchestra level, a grand balcony, and a small mezzanine below the balcony that added 366 seats. The Oriental also had rare functional boxes (those in most picture palaces were simply ornamental and could not seat patrons).<sup>49</sup> While admission prices varied with seating levels and shows, almost anyone could afford a ticket to the Oriental fantasy.

## The Program on October 18, 1927

This overview of picture-palace service, decoration, and programming leaves us with a question: why *did* patrons come to the theater? To answer it we will now return to the Oriental on October 18, 1927. Because the Oriental was a *picture* palace, we will start with the movie itself. The feature film that week was MGM's *Spring Fever*, a golf comedy starring William Haines and Joan Crawford that garnered a modest review from *Variety*<sup>50</sup> and decent mentions in *Film Daily*<sup>51</sup> and *Motion Picture News*.<sup>52</sup> To read a review of a 1920s feature, however, is not to understand its success, reception, or value to the theater. All of these elements were dependent upon the palace in which the film was exhibited. *Spring Fever* might have been a major hit in a theater that depended heavily on the feature to draw patrons, but it might have been largely ignored in a theater with more varied offerings. The significance of a feature also depended on whether it was exhibited as a first- or subsequent-run film (that is, whether it was new or had already been seen in other theaters).

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48 Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 48.

49 Theatre Historical Society, *Oriental Theatre*, 25.

50 "Spring Fever," *Variety*, October 19, 1927, 29.

51 The review tagline reads: "A darb for golf enthusiasts. Pleasing romance for all hands. But the golfers will get a special kick out of it." ("Spring Fever," *The Film Daily*, October 23, 1927, 6).

52 The review tagline reads: "Light Comedy Is Amusing" ("Spring Fever," *Motion Picture News*, October 28, 1927, 1344).

The entire show on October 18 was reviewed for *Variety*, and the reviewer's comments tell us exactly what *Spring Fever* meant to the patrons who saw it there: "The screen feature, 'Spring Fever,' somewhat above the Oriental's usual run, was still a long shot for any other Loop stand... It is now well known that Paul Ash's stamping ground is, for films, a detour off the road to success. So 'Fever' can consider itself side-tracked for obvious reasons."<sup>53</sup> Because the jargon used in trade-press reviews can be distracting, a loose translation might be helpful: "*Spring Fever* is of higher quality than Oriental patrons are used to, but it is not a great film. It would probably not have succeeded elsewhere in Chicago. Moreover, being shown at the Oriental will not help this film achieve success. Why? Because patrons come to the Oriental to see stage-band director Paul Ash, not the film, and he dominates the show in a way that prevents any film from really being noticed." Or as another *Variety* writer put it in 1927: "Such places like the Oriental depend on their stages, not their screens."<sup>54</sup>

By now, it should be clear that there is no single answer to the question of why patrons were attracted to the movie theater. We can, however, answer the more specific question of why patrons were coming to the *Oriental*. They came to see the superstar band leader Paul Ash and his elaborate stage presentations (Figure 2.10). The feature film was of lesser importance (although the *Variety* reviewer conceded that Haines might have been a draw in some quarters). Only five sentences into the review, it is clear to any reader that the Oriental was a theater that had developed its reputation not by offering the best feature films but by providing the finest live entertainment available in Chicago.

The order of elements in the *Variety* review for the Oriental program on October 18, 1927, tells us a great deal about the kind of show that theater offered. The first paragraph of a *Variety* review always reveals what was important at the theater, and this

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<sup>53</sup> Loop, "Oriental (Chicago)," 26.

<sup>54</sup> "Chi's New Policy Slow, \$48,000; Ash Up \$4,000, and Mindlin \$4,750," *Variety*, October 26, 1927, 8.



**Figure 2.10:** This advertisement appeared in *Variety* in August 1926.

one is no exception: “A standard Paul Ash-Oriental stage band presentation this week, meaning one of those shows in accordance with the plan that has established the house as the flagship of the jazz show fleet.”<sup>55</sup> The message is clear: Ash and his stage-band presentation were the key to success at the Oriental. Anyone reading this review in 1927 would have been interested primarily in what Ash was up to. The reviewer provided the vital information up front, and only then mentioned the feature film (the dismissive nod which I quoted and “translated” above). Additionally, the reviewer equated the quality of the Ash stage show with the quality of the entire program. In short, the show on October 18 was “in accordance” with Oriental standards.

While we have a great deal of information from the trade press about the contents of the stage show at the Oriental, the succession of events within the program is less clear. The Oriental show certainly opened with an instrumental overture, for that was the practice in all picture palaces, but there is no mention of it in either of the trade-press reviews. The *Variety* review focused on the stage show, the film, and the organ solo, while the *Exhibitors Herald* (a publication less concerned with films) printed one review for the stage show and another for the organ solo. The *Variety* reviewer ordered his discussion of events in a hierarchy of importance. At the end of the review, he lumped all of the “unimportant” elements into a dismissive closing comment: “News reels, shorts, trailers, etc., not to be forgotten”<sup>56</sup> Readers today cannot know which shorts and trailers were exhibited. While the reviewer has withheld certain details about film contents and exhibition, however, we can hazard a guess about the program order based on general information about other such shows as reported in the trade press. A 1926 account of a show at the New York Rialto, for example, provides the following program order: orchestral overture, newsreel, organ

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<sup>55</sup> Loop, “Oriental (Chicago),” 26.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 26.

solo, stage presentation, and finally the feature film.<sup>57</sup> Any trailers would certainly have followed the feature, while the unmentioned short subjects would have joined the newsreel and trailers in their respective positions.<sup>58</sup> That the organ solo preceded the stage presentation at the center of the show is an indication of its relative importance compared to the shorts, especially at a theater like the Oriental. And it is to an overview of that organ solo that we now turn.

## Henry A. Keates and his Organ Solo

The organ-solo portion of any picture-palace presentation was the space in the program dedicated to the organist. It could be used to perform a classical work, plug popular songs, accompany a singer, or even stage a miniature dramatization of song lyrics. It usually lasted about ten minutes. The type of organ solo presented varied from theater to theater and, within a given house, from week to week. Some organists provided a great deal of variety, shifting from serious to comical and from classical to popular—but not Henri A. Keates (Figure 2.11). The Oriental was a “singing house,” and its patrons expected the same thing every week: uninterrupted community singing led by their beloved organist (Figure 2.12).

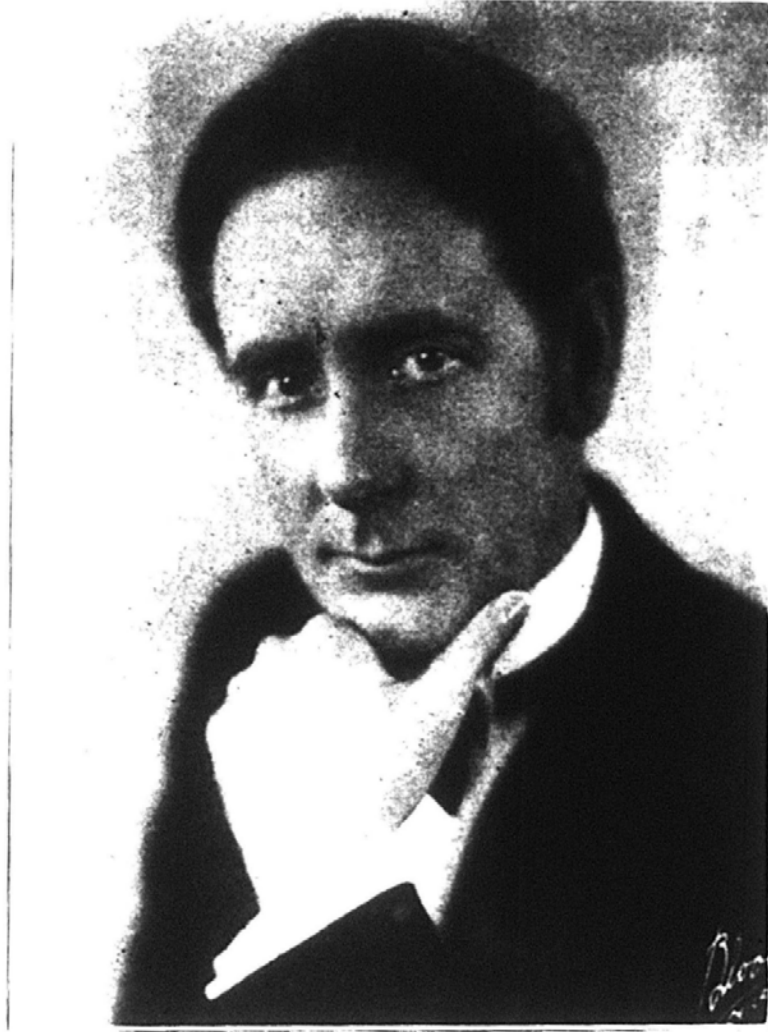
The organ solo at the Oriental on October 18, 1927, was well documented by reviewers at both *Variety* and *Exhibitors Herald*, for its success was vital to the success of the entire show. In fact, *Exhibitors Herald* dedicated a special column each week to the description of organ solos that were performed in important theaters all over the country. The cultivation of a noteworthy organist—one known for his inviting manner and entertaining presentations—was a priority for any picture palace, and the trade press responded to this need by offering positive models and advice for the console artist. The *Variety* reviewer of the performance on October 18 took this

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<sup>57</sup> “Ukulele Vocalists, Spanish Dancers, in N.Y. Rialto Show,” *Exhibitors Herald*, January 23, 1926, 49.

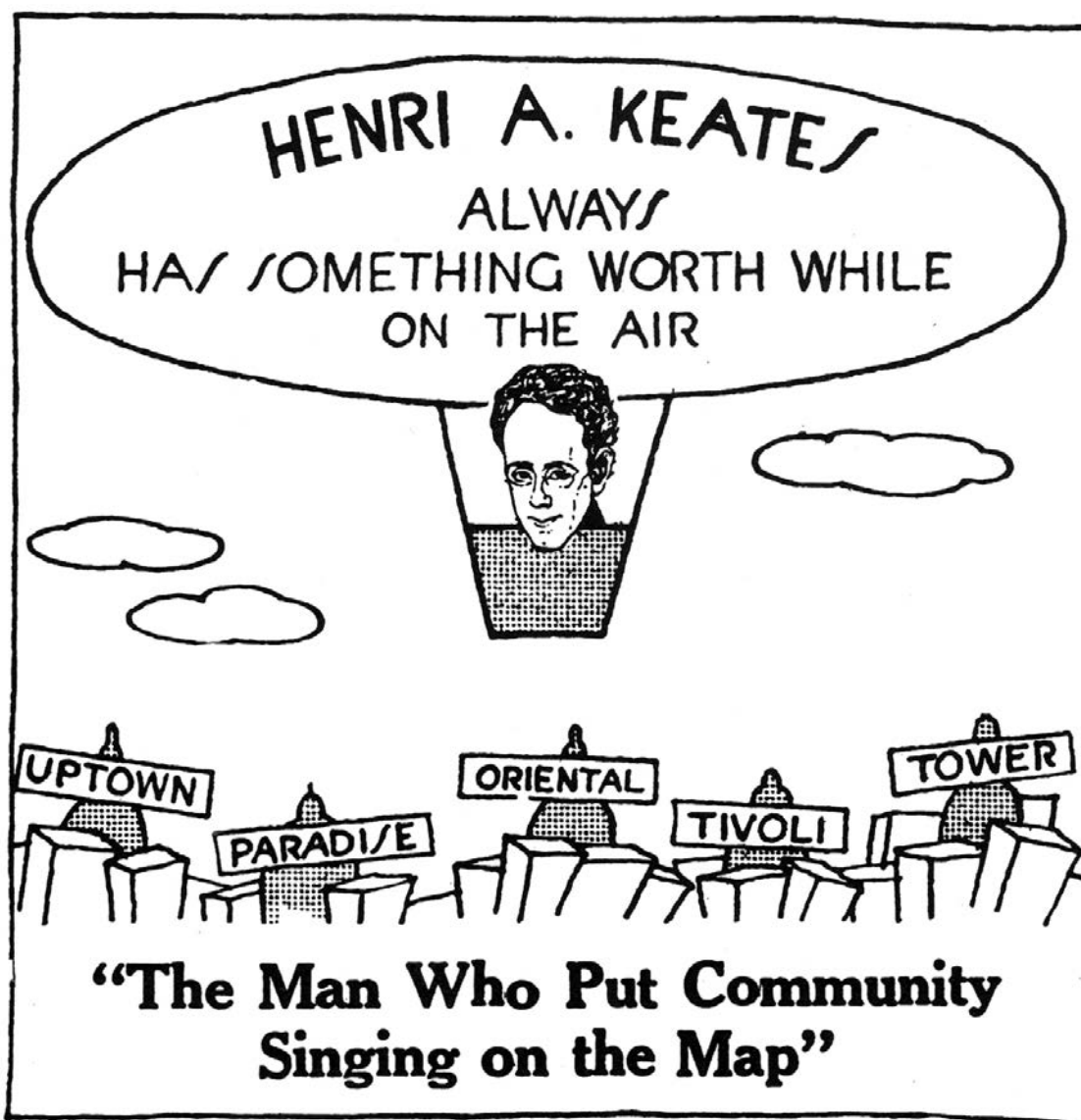
<sup>58</sup> “Program Layouts,” *Variety*, March 12, 1930, 21.





Here's the man who put community singing on the map—Henri A. Keates is his name and he presides at the console of the Oriental theatre, Chicago—Henri has played organ solos in nearly every picture house of note and has always succeeded with his own novelties—before singing became a fad in theatres Keates gave organ concerts and classical recitals proving that a good organist can and should play every class of music—and most of all what the public wants.

**Figure 2.11:** This photograph of Henri A. Keates was published in *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World* in July 1928. The caption indicates that Keates was capable of playing “high-class” music, but chose to provide his patrons with the entertainment they demanded—community singing. The thinly-veiled dismissal of community singing was a part of the trade-press attack on the practice, which will be explored in Chapter 4.



**Figure 2.12:** This advertisement for Keates and his program of community singing appeared in a December 1928 issue of *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*. It was in this month that Preston Sellers assumed primary responsibility for the Oriental console, while Keates began to rotate among several Balaban & Katz houses. Keates, however, maintained a dedicated fan base at the Oriental and continued to feature there until at least 1931. It is not clear whether the phrase “On The Air” in this advertisement refers to radio broadcasting. It is possible that B&K theaters broadcast shows during this time, but it is certain that Keates used a broadcasting theme in several of his community singing organ solos.

observation a step further and claimed that the organ solo at the Oriental revealed the nature of the audience:

Henri Keates was accorded the usual glad hand and hearty vocal response for his slides and organ solo; the screen stuff, hoked up to kill, but just the kind they eat up. Keates is probably the only theatre organist in the country who invariably can support an encore.<sup>59</sup> At the show caught it was estimated about 75 per cent of the audience responded, a very large number and enough to make plenty of racket. Perhaps 15 of the other 25 per cent had colds, though some of the singing 75 had them, too, but sang, nevertheless.

An exact opinion of Oriental audiences may be gained just by witnessing one of Henri's organ numbers. Repetitional weeks and continued success prove the element.<sup>60</sup>

While singing was always the purpose of Keates's organ solo, he and other organists often invoked themes or stories to tie a set of songs together. That week at the Oriental, Keates told the audience a fictitious story intended to inspire hearty participation and cement the bond between organist and audience. To do so, he communicated through the universal organists' medium of lantern slides projected from the booth by the technician and accompanied by Keates himself. Such slides could either be purchased or, as seems to be the case here, produced by the organist. In many cases, the words on the slides actually fit a tune and could be read in time with the music.

The *Exhibitors Herald* review of Keates's organ solo appeared in that journal's "Organ Solos" column, a weekly set of accounts that detailed the work of significant organists all over the country. In October 1927, the reviewer at the Oriental tells us that Keates used a personal story to flatter and connect with his audience before introducing the program of popular songs:

Henri Keates (Chicago Oriental) worked in that ever popular saying 'It Pays to Advertise' in his organ story of this week. All in fun, he informed the audience,

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59 Keates was not the only organist who could rely on the demand for an encore. While he was one of the most successful in engaging with his audience, there were very popular organists all over the country. Indeed, perhaps none was so famed for his unbroken streak of encores as Eddie Meikel of Chicago (about whom this reviewer really ought to have been aware). The point that the reviewer is trying to make, however, is quite accurate: the patrons at the Oriental adored Keates, and his solo was a highlight of the program.

60 Loop, "Oriental (Chicago)," 26.

he was somewhat addicted to reading advertisements in the magazine and his jocular comment on the thin hair, real estate, get fat, weight reducing and wrinkle and face lifting advertisements went over big. He completely won over his audience when he advised that he told the representative who called in connection with his answering an ad for singing lessons that his audience did not need any such thing.<sup>61</sup>

After getting the participants in the right mood, Keates launched into an unconnected set of the hit songs that were popular fodder for picture-palace community sings everywhere, including “Underneath the Wabash Moon,” “Bye, Bye Pretty Baby,” “Side by Side,” and “Just Once Again.” Like most organ solos, Keates’ presentation had nothing to do with the subsequent stage show or the feature film.<sup>62</sup> Its purpose was to get the audience excited and to instill a sense of camaraderie and friendliness. If the organ solo succeeded in these things, it would prepare the audience to enjoy the stage show as much as possible.

The *Variety* review includes no details about the songs Keates played or his style of presentation that week. It does, however, tell us what his audience expected from the organ solo, and it gives us insight into Keates’s role at the Oriental. It also reveals something important about the position of trade-press reviewers who worked in the film-exhibition industry. This reviewer derisively described Keates’s screen material as “hoked up to kill,” but admitted that the audience liked it that way. Critics of theater organists often dismissed the preferences of the audience. Instead, they condemned the elements of an organ presentation that had popular appeal (and therefore made the organist into a success) and demanded a higher standard of artistry in place of lowbrow comedy. It seems that the audience at the Oriental was out for a good laugh, not intellectual stimulation. Keates’s “hoked up” approach to community singing was certainly calculated to appeal to the maximum number of patrons. Unfortunately,

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61 “Organ Solos: Henri Keates,” *Exhibitors Herald*, October 22, 1927, 37.

62 Albert F. Brown was the only organist to regularly link his solos with the feature film. He pioneered a form of stage presentation accompanied by the organ and offered miniature song-based stage dramas as prologues to the film (for an example, see “Organ Solos: Albert F. Brown,” *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, January 18, 1928, 50).

we cannot know the exact phrases printed on the lantern slides he displayed, but we do know that they succeeded marvelously in their aim: to incite the audience into song. The reviewer estimated that 75% of the audience engaged in community singing, and even excused most of those not singing with the remark that they must have had colds. In other words, the reviewer believed that 90% of the patrons were delighted with the organ solo and at least had the desire to join in. He cannot help but pair his comment about the sniffing 15% with a snide remark on the quality of the vocalizing, a note which betrays the reviewer's highbrow status. Despite any personal reservations on the part of the *Variety* reviewer, there is no question that Keates's community sing was enjoyed and that it met the expectations of his audience. Most of those who participated would have been weekly visitors to the Oriental and were quite familiar with Keates's style.

The most interesting observation made in the *Variety* review appears near the end: "An exact opinion of Oriental audiences may be gained just by witnessing one of Henri's organ numbers." What could the reviewer have meant by this offhand assessment?<sup>2</sup> To begin with, it does not seem to be complimentary. The reviewer had already criticized the patrons' love of hoke and poor singing. Perhaps his point was only that Oriental patrons were interested in fun and laughter above all else, and that they attended the movie theater to relax and have a good time. This statement reflects the contrasts between critical assessments and actual theater audiences that will resurface throughout this study. Critics of picture-palace presentations often preferred that audiences exhibit more refined tastes and personal restraint, and in turn they deplored the methods employed by showmen to entertain. But of course the reviewer was all but powerless: the patrons made their preferences clear, and musicians like Keates would have been foolish not to comply.

## Paul Ash and the Stage Show

Keates' community sing was followed immediately by the stage show, the true focal point of the program. Paul Ash was the undisputed star of the Oriental, and his dazzling career was no accident (Figure 2.13). The means through which he became a celebrity, however, reveal the innermost workings of the Balaban & Katz style of picture-palace entertainment. Since Balaban & Katz based the success of their theaters on live entertainment, not films, they spared no effort in securing and promoting the finest stage personalities. Ash was not merely an entertainer in their employ. The exhibitors worked hard to develop Ash into a marketable brand, a unique offering that would characterize their theaters. Ash did not appear *at* the Oriental; he *was* the Oriental. Many imitators appeared, but Ash was inimitable and irreplaceable.

Ash's first weeks with Balaban & Katz reveal the method by which the exhibitors cultivated stage talent. In early 1925, the theater chain was in merger negotiations with Paramount, a business deal that would benefit both parties. The merger would give Balaban & Katz access to first-run motion pictures, and it would give Paramount the opportunity to associate with the nation's premier exhibitors and to implement the B&K model across their family of theaters. As part of the deal, Balaban & Katz took over operation of the McVickers theater in Chicago (located downtown only two blocks away from the future Oriental). This arrangement came with complications for Balaban & Katz, since the McVickers was close to their existing downtown theater, the Chicago. To successfully operate the McVickers, B&K needed a new style of stage entertainment that would attract patrons to the area but not interfere with the business of their existing theaters. A.J. Balaban was assigned the task of designing this new presentation policy. A.J. had successfully experimented with stage bands in the past, and he suspected that a stage-band policy might be perfect for the McVickers.

With this idea in mind, A.J. traveled in January 1925 to San Francisco for the express purpose of recruiting Paul Ash from the Granada theater. Ash had already proved



**Figure 2.13:** This publicity photograph of Paul Ash unfortunately fails to capture his vibrant red hair. Courtesy Theatre Historical Society.

himself to be a significant draw in that city, and A.J. predicted that the right marketing would make him a star in Chicago. Ash was not regarded as a great musician in his time. A contemporary columnist remarked, "He plays the piano only fairly well," and added that he did not produce his own orchestrations or design his own stage shows.<sup>63</sup> But A.J. was aware that none of this mattered. He noted in his memoirs that Ash had all the qualities of a charismatic host, and this is what A.J. valued. He recalled that Ash invited patrons to enjoy the show with a friendly "listen folks" and introduced acts in a manner that spread good cheer and community spirit.<sup>64</sup> This was also the view of the *Exhibitors Herald*: "It is his sense of audience reaction, his minute-to-minute grasp of the situation beyond the foots, that makes the public demand ever more and more of his stuff."<sup>65</sup> A.J. trusted his evaluation of the band leader and knew that he would be a success in the McVickers. After a three-hour interview, Ash agreed to come to Chicago at a pay cut. A.J. won Ash over with his enthusiastic vision for stage entertainment and the promise of greater fame.<sup>66</sup>

Once Balaban & Katz had succeeded in securing Ash, they set out upon an extraordinary publicity campaign to make his a household name. The exhibitors were certain that Ash had the potential to be a major draw in Chicago, and they spared no effort to see that he became one. B&K convinced Paramount, their new partner, to make available upwards of fifty of their billboards around town. They then used these billboards exclusively to promote Ash and his shows at the McVickers. Ash was worried that he was being oversold to the Chicago public, but A.J. assured him that he could live up to the advertising.<sup>67</sup> The campaign ran for four weeks and was

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63 "Paul Ash Triumphs," *Exhibitors Herald*, May 15, 1926, 123.

64 Carrie Balaban, *Continuous Performance: The Story of A.J. Balaban* (New York: Van Rees Press, 1942), 82.

65 "Paul Ash Triumphs," 123.

66 C. Balaban, *Continuous Performance*, 81-3.

67 *Ibid.*, 84.



successful in establishing Ash as a popular entertainer and a fixture of the Chicago theater scene. The new Balaban & Katz star was duly rewarded for his role in making the McVickers a success. In July 1925, *Variety* reported that Ash was “the highest paid musical director in Chicago and its vicinities,” since he had recently been awarded a three-year contract at a salary of \$700 a week to replace his initial six-week contract at \$500.<sup>68</sup>

When the Oriental opened in 1926, Balaban & Katz arranged for Ash to move to their lavish new theater.<sup>69</sup> The exhibitors wanted their biggest star to perform in a theater designed and built for the theater chain, not one acquired through a merger. Balaban & Katz, however, found themselves in a delicate position. They had decided to feature Ash as the headliner at their new theater, but they could not risk losing patronage at the McVickers. As a *Variety* reviewer so eloquently put it, “they had to inform the ardent Paul Ash fans that he no longer graces the theatre with his presence and at the same time prevent the Ash fans from interpreting the announcement as a signal to follow their beloved redhead en masse into the new Balaban and Katz Oriental theatre and leave the McVickers flat.”<sup>70</sup> It seems that they bungled the affair. First, Balaban & Katz announced that Ash was to take a “much-needed rest” from his duties at the McVickers, a move which might have facilitated Ash’s graceful transition to the Oriental. However, Balaban & Katz lost control of the situation when they failed to acknowledge Ash’s departure from the McVickers, even after a newspaper interview with the star had made his move public knowledge. Ash was replaced by another band leader, Henri Gendron, who was to continue with the stage-band policy that Ash had popularized. However, Ash was much more than a band leader, and the

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68 “\$700 for Ash—3 Years,” *Variety*, July 15, 1925, 38.

69 Once established at the Oriental, Ash assumed the thematically appropriate new title “Rajah of Jazz” (“Paul Ash Promoted,” *Variety*, May 5, 1926, 48). His opening at the new theater was proclaimed “a real triumph,” and over the years his drawing power only increased (“Paul Ash Triumphs,” *Variety*, May 15, 1926, 123).

70 McVickers (Chicago), *Variety*, May 5, 1926, 24.

legacy he had built at the McVickers amounted to more than a presentation policy. He was a charismatic performer and his drawing power lay in who he was, not what he did. Many would imitate his presentation style and some would succeed with the stage-band presentation, but Ash himself was inimitable. The reviewer quoted above concluded with the question, “Will McVickers keep its seats warm after Ash opens at the Oriental theatre?”<sup>71</sup> The McVickers did keep its seats warm—a testament to the appeal of its varied program and other offerings—but the Oriental took over as the premier presentation venue in downtown Chicago.

The stage-band style of presentation that Paul Ash pioneered became the preferred format for live entertainment in the movie theater. The popularity of this style peaked in 1927, when *Motion Picture News* announced that the Balaban & Katz Chicago theater had just become “the last large de luxe house in Chicago to go into a stage band policy and its success apparently proves the popularity of this type of entertainment beyond any doubt.”<sup>72</sup> By this time, the stage-band model had not only come to completely dominate Chicago’s film-exhibition practice. Over two hundred theaters across the nation had implemented a stage-band policy, and the band leaders who worked in those theaters were said to be following “an Ash policy.”<sup>73</sup>

The “Ash policy” was a variety of stage show for which the band musicians would move from the pit to the stage (the organist was often responsible for providing music during this transition). An Ash show was a stage presentation, and therefore incorporated the elements that were vital to every picture-house stage show: lavish

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71 “McVickers (Chicago),” 24. The reviewer also mentioned organist Henri Keates, who conducted a community sing entitled “Bits from 1924 Hits” and met with exuberant audience support. Keates was also to leave the McVickers and become an established figure at the Oriental, headlining alongside Ash, but at least this reviewer seemed much less concerned about the impact of Keates’s departure on business.

72 “Chicago,” *Motion Picture News*, October 14, 1927, 1192.

73 For an example of this reference, see Clark Fiers’s article on organist showmanship. In it he observes, “If, on the other hand, the theater is devoted to the lighter forms of entertainment, having an Ash policy for example, where the patrons are not adverse to seeing a little clowning from the organist, then the fellow could assume that role” (Clark Fiers, “Theatre Organist and Showmanship,” *Exhibitors Herald*, October 1, 1927, 17).

sets to create atmosphere and a series of acts to provide the entertainment. The band would remain onstage throughout the show to accompany performers and supply the latest songs. The band leader acted as the master of ceremonies, which meant that he provided segues in between acts and chatted with the audience in addition to directing the band. The success of a performer's "turn" on the picture-palace stage was determined largely by the context in which it occurred. In a sense, the theater was a family, a congenial gathering of neighbors with the band leader at the head. (The organist also occupied a significant paternal position, although only during the organ solo.) To visit the picture palace was to see old friends (on stage) and delight in their company. That atmosphere of congeniality took precedence over the content and quality of the entertainment. As long as the band leader was charismatic and the sets were fantastical, the "turns" would succeed. This model was very successful at the Oriental, and Paul Ash was responsible for the success of many guest performers.

Ash trained a number of band leaders to emulate his style, such as Al Kvale at the Chicago Norshore and Lou Kosloff ("who does a perfect Paul Ash imitation"<sup>74</sup>) at the Chicago Senate and Harding. He also inspired numerous imitators, including Paul Whiteman at the New York Paramount. This is significant: Whiteman was perhaps the decade's most influential band leader, and the Paramount was arguably the most important picture palace in the world. Ash's influence and reputation in the late 1920s can hardly be overstated, and one can only imagine the extraordinary thrill of watching this legend perform live as the star of the show in the fantastical environment of the Oriental.

Reviewers have left us a glut of information about the Oriental stage show the week of October 18, 1927. The sheer level of detail recorded for public consumption reveals the importance of Ash's stage show to the theater's success. Like most picture-palace stage shows, all of the acts in one of Ash's programs were unified, more or less,

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74 A. Raymond Gallo, "Ash Policy Has Hold on Theatres," *Exhibitors Herald*, August 20, 1927, 33-4.

by a theme, even though there was no plot or narrative interconnecting them. Each week an elaborate stage set was constructed to suit the chosen theme, and the guest performers had the option to appear in costume. The band leader would program thematically appropriate music, but the guest performers presented numbers from their repertoire and made no attempt to integrate their presentations into the show. The theme served three purposes. First, it unified a bill of entertainment that would otherwise have no internal cohesion. Second, it provided spectacle, which might not be guaranteed by a given set of acts on their own. A solo singer in a vaudeville show could only make music, but in the picture-palace presentation she could appear in costume before an extraordinary set and thus become part of an exotic tableau. Finally, the use of a theme provided another opportunity for escapist fantasy.

For the week of October 18, 1927, the theme was “In Spain.” This theme was advertised on the theater marquee, so patrons knew what was in store and were perhaps intrigued by the idea. The *Exhibitors Herald* reviewer reported that the realistic patio scene assembled onstage was so convincing that the patron might in fact believe he had been transported overseas. When the stage show is taken into consideration, one might say that the Oriental offered a fantasy (the Spanish show) within a fantasy (the Indian architecture) within a fantasy (the class-attainment illusion of picture-palace culture). The patron had many opportunities to lose herself in the exotic and expensive before the feature film even reached the screen. The *Herald* reviewer added that the show was “Spanish throughout,” but this comment must have applied primarily to its appearance. Ash programmed only a few numbers of a Spanish flavor for his band, while the other performers drew their selections from the catalog of recent hits. This meant that the show opened and closed with “Spanish” music, but consisted largely of American popular song.<sup>75</sup>

On October 18, 1927, the house band, without Ash, opened the stage show with the

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<sup>75</sup> “Chicago Oriental,” *Exhibitors Herald*, October 29, 1927, 40.

now-forgotten song “Until Tomorrow.” A costumed Jack North provided the vocals while the all-female Abbot dancers, garbed in orange and black, entered from the wings to perform a castanet dance. The Abbot dancers were a house troupe and appeared in all of the shows, always in costumes and routines that suited the theme. Ash made his grand entrance after the opening number, as was his custom. While North, who played the banjo and sang in his act, is hardly remembered today as a popular-music luminary, he was significant enough in 1927 to warrant a large advertisement in *Variety* the following week (Figure 2.14). The spot, which featured a caricature of North, proclaimed him to be “The World’s Greatest Entertainer” and noted that it was his second week headlining with Paul Ash at the Oriental.<sup>76</sup> Apparently, North himself had such drawing power that Balaban & Katz considered the expense of a trade-press advertisement to be a worthy investment. The *Variety* reviewer explicitly dismissed North as an act that wouldn’t have been strong enough to succeed in the heyday of vaudeville and added that the banjo-and-singing combination had been worn out already by superior performers. But he countered these remarks with a sharp observation that gets to the heart of Ash’s stage-band presentation approach: “Jack also gags with Ash and clowns with the band, which is the foremost reason why he stopped this show.” North may not have been a stellar musician (neither was Ash), but his ability to project congeniality and to perform intimacy with the host and, by extension, the audience, won him the applause.

Ash made his entrance that week costumed as a Spanish don. While this might pale in comparison with his dramatic first appearance on the Oriental’s opening night—he was carried in on a litter garbed as a Rajah—it still suited his flamboyant stage persona.<sup>77</sup> The patrons came to see Ash, so to make them wait through at least one number was simply good showmanship. After leading the band through “Dream

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<sup>76</sup> “Advertisement,” *Variety*, October 26, 1927, 18.

<sup>77</sup> Hal, “Oriental (Chicago),” *Variety*, May 26, 1926, 24.



**Figure 2.14:** This advertisement for Jack North appeared in *Variety* in October 1927. North had been heavily promoted in the trade press for the past year.

Tango,” a 1913 number doubtless resurrected because it was appropriate for the theme of the stage show, Ash welcomed local radio tenor Flavio Plasencia to the stage to sing “La Paloma,” a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century classic that the audience would have recognized. The *Variety* reviewer dismissed Plasencia as a space filler. While his career does not seem to have been extraordinary, it is interesting to note that he in fact recorded “La Paloma,” along with three other sides, for Victor only two months after this appearance.

Next the band played “Just Another Day Wasted Away,” a 1927 song by Roy Turk of which the Oriental audience was particularly fond. It was at this point that the musical contents of the show deviated from the Spanish theme, which was not to return until the finale. Ash chose to offer music that was sure to be well received rather than maintain the exotic illusion. After a round of hearty applause for the instrumental performance, a male trio entered to sing the song and won even greater applause. As one reviewer recalled, “Their harmony in the modern odle-de-do manner sounds well together, but none has a creditable voice in solo.”<sup>78</sup> The *Exhibitors Herald* review credits the singers as “The Three Aces,” but in *Variety* they are listed as “The Three Rajah Harmonists,” known until that very week as perhaps “The Three Collegiates” (the reviewer was not certain). It was not uncommon for ensembles of the period to work under different names, especially when recording. In this case, the trio had been permanently added to the Oriental show by Ash after a very successful first week. For them to perform under a house name such as “The Three Rajah Harmonists” would have been a good advertisement both for the theater and the singers. It is likely that Ash himself insisted upon the change so as to match the name of the group with his own title, “The Rajah of Jazz.” The “Rajah Harmonists” followed up with “My Blue Heaven” by Walter Donaldson, perhaps the most popular song of 1927 and prime fodder for movie-house musicians. “My Blue Heaven” was heard in every palace across the country and was heavily advertised by the publisher, Leo Feist, in

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<sup>78</sup> Loop, “Oriental (Chicago),” 26.

the trade press (Figure 2.15). The “Rajah Harmonists” closed with “A Night in June” and “Are You Happy,” another recent hit.

This singing was followed by the Dean Brothers, a pair of soft-shoe dancers with a focus on acrobatics.<sup>79</sup> They alternated between solo and combined routines. The *Variety* reviewer informs us that the Dean Brothers stopped the show with their eccentric presentation, all in Spanish costume. The music for the Dean Brothers’s dancing would have been provided by the stage band, and the audience would have been aware at all times of the dancers, the musicians, and the exotic stage setting. Neither reviewer tells us if the Dean Brothers danced to music of a Spanish flavor, but it is almost certain that they did not. Instead, they would have performed their standard act, identical in content to what they presented in other venues. The theme existed in the costumes, the set, and the band’s opening numbers. Each visiting act was woven into the fabric of the show primarily with visual cues—the performers were not required to learn any new material.

Next to take the stage was Peggy Bernier, a young woman whose history with the Oriental and its patrons colored her reception enormously. Bernier began her career with Balaban & Katz and was shepherded to stardom by Ash himself. She performed with Ash for a number of weeks at the McVickers early in his Chicago career and was immediately slated for appearances at the Oriental when that theater opened in 1926 (she sang “Tonight’s My Night With Baby” in the inaugural program). A.J. Balaban attributed Bernier’s success, as well as that of a host of others, to Ash’s “encouraging and expert presentation”—that is, his ability make a performer likable and elicit a positive response from the audience.<sup>80</sup> By October 1927 she had performed around the country, but the *Variety* reviewer commented that she was rather “tame” when away from the theater that created her. However, it wasn’t Bernier’s career that inspired the

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79 The reviewers do not specify that there were two Dean Brothers, but the language implies as much, and a dancing act would likely feature two performers.

80 C. Balaban, “Continuous Performance,” 84.



[illegible]

**Figure 2.15:** This two-page advertisement appeared in *Variety* in October 1927.

affection of patrons at the Oriental. It was her love affair with another Ash protégée.

Milton Watson was a tenor and stage personality who had worked with Ash throughout the band leader's time in Chicago. He opened with Ash at the McVickers and played a supporting role in the presentation of stage shows. During the final weeks before Ash officially departed from the McVickers Watson served as master of ceremonies in his place, and when Ash moved to the new Oriental he took Watson with him. Watson sang Irving Berlin's "At Peace with the World" on the opening-week program at the Oriental, just two numbers before Bernier sang "Tonight's My Night With Baby."

While Bernier and Watson must have encountered one another before the opening of the Oriental, the *Variety* reviewer told the tale of their love in idealized terms: "Where else did Peggy first meet Milton Watson but on the stage of the Oriental? There isn't one masculine Oriental regular who doesn't think he should have been the best man at the Bernier-Watson wedding, nor is there one flapper with the Oriental habit who doesn't think she should have been bridesmaid, at least. And nothing scares up trade faster than a romance that everyone is in on."<sup>81</sup> In this account, the affair was strictly public. The marriage between Bernier and Watson was literally the property of Oriental patrons, and those patrons felt a deep personal connection to the stage performers. As the reviewer phrased it, Bernier and Watson actually met *on the stage* of the Oriental, in full public view, and as participants in a form of public entertainment specifically designed by Ash to make the audience feel as if the performers were their friends. While it is highly unlikely that the two actually met on a stage anywhere, the metaphor is apt. It tells the love story from the perspective of the audience, for whom Bernier and Watson did in fact meet on stage, right in front of their eyes. Because no-one in the audience really knew Bernier or Watson, each patron had the power to create the stars in her own image and to imagine their relationship in idealized

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<sup>81</sup> Loop, "Oriental (Chicago)," 26.

terms. Bernier and Watson became part of the Oriental fantasy. It is no wonder that men and women of the audience were disappointed not to be featured in the wedding itself. In the public mind, Bernier and Watson were the confidants of everyone who visited the Oriental. They appeared on cue each week in the patron's own home-away-from-home to joke, laugh, and entertain. Although Watson did not even appear at the Oriental in the week of October 18, Bernier's connection to him and to the theater itself assured her place as an audience favorite no matter how she performed. She had long since ceased to be a star and become a close friend.

On a separate note, the descriptions of Bernier's performance by the two reviewers—*Variety* and *Exhibitors Herald*—sheds some light on the divergent goals and approaches that characterized the two review departments. Because these two trade journals will play a significant role in the pages to come, it is worth pausing for a moment to examine their motives and techniques. While the *Variety* review focused almost exclusively on Bernier's personal history with the Oriental, pausing only for a moment to describe her (dismissively) from the musical perspective as “a cute little frail-voiced soubret,”<sup>82</sup> the *Exhibitors Herald* reviewer provided a more formal assessment of Bernier's performance, admiring her “capacity for taking any old song, good or bad, and injecting something into it that puts it over with a bang.”<sup>83</sup> It is only from the *Herald* that we learn which songs she actually performed: “I Ain't That Kind of a Baby,” “He Don't Wanta,” and “Miss Annabelle Lee” (the first and third songs are hits of 1927, while the second was probably misidentified). The *Herald* also noted that Bernier has all but abandoned the motion-picture stage to take an important role in the Chicago cast of a musical comedy, “Good News.” The *Variety* review painted the picture of an inadequate performer who succeeded on the merit of her personal relationship with the audience, while the *Herald* took Bernier more seriously as a

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82 Loop, “Oriental (Chicago),” 26.

83 “Chicago Oriental,” 40.

singer and emphasized the legitimacy of her career, not the touching local romance between her and Watson.

After Bernier's highly personal and familiar act—a break in thematic continuity, as she was the only performer not to appear in Spanish costume—the Abbott dancers returned to the stage to present the Kinkajou dance, a popular dance designed and debuted by Mrs. Edna Passpae at the Dance Master's of America Convention less than two months before. While the Kinkajou failed to take hold in the public imagination as the Charleston did, its presence on the Oriental program demonstrates the fervent desire of movie houses to stay up to date with the latest music and dance trends. The performance won a generous hand due to its incorporation of novel stunts. Next, Jack North returned to the stage to play the banjo and sing “If You See Sophie Like I See Sophie,” “I’m Back in Love with You,” and “Turkish Towel,” a surviving number from 1926. One reviewer described him as “a clever performer” and reported that he was well received.<sup>84</sup>

The last act before the finale reminds us that picture-palace presentation could be highly varied. Two children of about five years of age, declared by one reviewer to be “the hit of the show,” sang, danced, and bantered with Ash. They appeared in Spanish costume to suit the theme and appearance of the show, although the numbers they performed were drawn from their own repertoire. The *Exhibitors Herald* listed the children as Geraldine and Joe while *Variety* called the girl Margery, but either way they seem to have been a typical child performance act, booked into the Oriental for the standard week-long run. To open they sang “Who’s Your Sweetheart,” after which the girl sang “Dew Dew Dewy Day” (a hit of 1927 that appeared on picture palace bills across the nation for months, and had in fact featured in Keates’s community singing the previous week).<sup>85</sup> The *Exhibitors Herald* reviewer noted that the little star

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84 “Chicago Oriental,” 40.

85 “Organ Solos: Henry Keates,” *Exhibitors Herald*, October 15, 1927, 58.

was able to engage in “all the byplay with Ash that the grownup songster sometimes pull[s].”<sup>86</sup> This suggests that the success of the act was in part due to the performer’s ability to joke with the host and connect with the audience on a personal, casual level. (It is fascinating to note that even a child performer was conditioned to appeal to the patron’s desire for intimate connection with the stage.) After another song from the girl, “My Man,” the two youngsters closed with an Apache dance over which the *Variety* reviewer waxed enthusiastic: “Their routine is automatic. But imagine a pair of kids doing a rough-and-tumble apache, good or bad! It is something that can’t miss.”<sup>87</sup> The Apache dance was not in reference to the Native American tribe, but rather a Parisian street gang named rather crudely for their perceived savagery. The dance—which some might no longer consider appropriate for small children—was modeled on the violent discourse between a pimp and a prostitute. While the role of children in stage entertainment is quite another issue, it is interesting to note one last time the extreme disharmony between the presentation theme and the actual offerings in the show. This program clearly illustrates the fact that each performer brought his or her own pre-set routine to the stage. Performers appeared in costume as a concession to the theater, but they did not insert more appropriate material or remove elements that seemed absurdly inappropriate.

While Ash and his band were present on stage throughout all of the preceding numbers, they regained the audience’s focus for the finale. The band performed “An Old Guitar and an Old Refrain,” a 1927 number which was both up-to-date and appropriate to the presentation theme (it bears the subtitle “A Song of Spain”). The responsibility for musically supporting the theme of the show fell to Ash and his regular performers, who both opened and closed each presentation. “The Three Rajah Harmonists” entered to sing a chorus of the song, while the Abbott dancers returned,

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86 “Chicago Oriental,” 40.

87 Loop, “Oriental (Chicago),” 26.

garbed in “beautiful paper dresses and high black headdresses,”<sup>88</sup> to perform a “waltz” (this is peculiar, as the song is not in triple time). The *Exhibitors Herald* reviewer described the closing scene of the show: “As the finale begins, they mount small pedestals illuminated with colored lights. The lights shine up in the paper dresses, giving a beautiful illuminated effect, and colored lights appear in the crowns of their hats. The entire effect is extremely beautiful.”<sup>89</sup> This climactic visual effect closed out the Ash stage show that had drawn so many to the Oriental that week, and ended the exotic journey promised by the stage presentation.

## The Feature Film

All that was left in the program was the feature itself. It is now easy to frame the film as an afterthought to the Oriental stage show, which boasted dazzling costumes, flamboyant stars, and even a real-life romance. The picture, *Spring Fever*, represented yet another opportunity for escape. The patron, as she viewed the film, could indulge in the fantasy lives of the well-to-do set featured on-screen, just as she might have imagined a journey to India or Spain during other moments in the picture palace experience. She could also escape into the glamorous lives of the movie stars themselves. The film stars could become her friends in the same way that Paul Ash and Peggy Bernier had become her friends. The program came to a close with trailers for the coming feature, which, along with the rest of the show, changed once a week—a promise that the fantasy world would be renewed and made available once again to the weary visitor.

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88 “Chicago Oriental,” 40.

89 Ibid., 40.

## CHAPTER 3

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# COMMUNITY SINGING DURING THE ORGAN SOLO

**M**UCH OF THIS STUDY engages with individual organists and their work in specific theaters. This roots our understanding of organist-led community singing in its original contexts: as an element of the picture show, as an indication of class status, and as a means of connecting with a specific audience by appealing to local concerns. In this chapter, however, I shift to more general or abstract concerns, namely, how each element of the organ solo, from repertoire to lighting to the organist's appearance, was typically presented. What follows is a inventory of characteristic decisions made by every theater organist when he or she (although most of the celebrated organists were men) planned a community-singing session.

### Community Singing Enters the Picture Palace

Film exhibition and community singing had appeared in tandem before the latter invaded the organ solo. Service organizations had offered programs of films and community singing throughout the Great War. Often, the entertainment took place in the same public parks where these organizations also staged other patriotic activities. In 1919, for example, the Boston-based War Service Unit presented “motion pictures of Russian scenes and Red Cross activities” at the Charles River Esplanade—a public

park located in the Back Bay neighborhood.<sup>1</sup> At the conclusion of the film program, a song leader directed the audience in community singing. We also have evidence that community singing entered picture theaters during this time as part of the regular exhibition program. The published details are sparse, but it appears that this community singing was originally led by song leaders, not organists, and that these sings continued to rely on the repertory of the patriotic movement.<sup>2</sup> The early accounts of community singing in the picture theater come from Boston, which may have been the first metropolitan area to adopt the practice. In 1926, the *Boston Daily Globe* waxed nostalgic over community singing at the movies as “one of the features of the past.”<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to pinpoint the occasion—or even the year—when a theater organist first incorporated community singing into a picture-palace program. In the first place, neither organ solos nor community singing were regularly covered in the trade press until the mid-1920s. Occasional references appeared, but no publication saw fit to document the inauguration and spread of community singing. Trade journals, that is, only gave the practice significant coverage once it had been thoroughly established. The second problem is more subtle and provides the researcher with a greater challenge. When organists directed community singing, they almost always projected lyrics for the audience to follow, either via slide or film. Therefore, it is tempting to read early references to the projection of lyrics as references to commu-

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1 “Movies at the Esplanade,” *Boston Daily Globe*, August 9, 1919, 6.

2 “Bowdoin Square Theatre,” *Boston Daily Globe*, December 3, 1918, 3.

3 “Notes About the Players,” *Boston Daily Globe*, February 7, 1926, A45. The *Globe* anticipated with delight the return of a song leader—who would provide a “bit of get-together cheerfulness”—to the Loew’s Orpheum. The young man in question, “Art” Spaulding, led singing in Loew’s Boston houses for at least a year with considerable success. Spaulding was linked with the publishing industry, and he plugged new songs with the aid of lantern slides (Libbey, “State (Boston),” *Variety*, February 23, 1927, 22). In this way, Spaulding’s act was quite unlike the community singing experience of the Great War. The *Globe* also ignored the fact that a number of organists offered community singing in Boston theaters that was, in terms of content, identical to that which Spaulding led (Libbey, “Loew’s State (Boston),” *Variety*, September 22, 1926, 19).



nity singing. For example, the earliest account of projected lyrics that I have found to date describes a 1921 solo by the organist Henri A. Keates at the Liberty theater in Portland, OR. “The song is not featured by the usual method of a slide,” wrote the columnist, “but by a special reel of motion pictures.”<sup>4</sup> Since some five years later Keates’s name would become synonymous with community singing, it is tempting to assume that this is an early account of that activity. Nonetheless, because there is no actual mention of singing in this review, we cannot do so.

Slides and films that contained lyrics were not only employed to facilitate community singing. Organists who performed popular songs but did not invite singing usually projected such slides as well. In these cases, the audience was expected to read the lyrics and to follow the interplay between text and music but not to vocalize. Consequently, early accounts of projected lyrics need not imply that community singing had taken hold in theaters. The presence of organist-led community singing cannot be demonstrated until the trade press began to explicitly review the practice in 1925. By that point, though, it was clear that community singing had been developing for some time.

## The Organ Solo

In those theaters that practiced it, community singing was almost always directed by the organist as part of his organ solo. The “organ solo” was the portion of the program given over to the organist to use as he or she saw fit. This means that the organ solo was not necessarily a solo at all, for it often incorporated additional performers or audience participation. It was usually about ten minutes long and took place soon after the “overture,” but picture-show programming was quite flexible, and neither the length nor the position of the organ solo were rigidly determined. Programming

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4 “Feature Song on Film,” *Music Trade Review*, November 12, 1921, 47.

depended somewhat on the strengths of the organist, but was primarily determined by the character of the theater.<sup>5</sup>

Needless to say, organists played a large role in the success of community singing. They chose the songs with care and presented them in unique settings that surprised and entertained. They played with great skill, carefully articulating each word with the organ and maintaining correct tempi.<sup>6</sup> It appears that organists were wise to put such effort into community-singing solos: trade-press columnists often warned organists against forcing their patrons to sing. As one writer put it, “They must be cajoled and good-naturedly guided into enjoyable ensemble vocalizing.”<sup>7</sup> Publishers in particular feared that audiences would turn against the practice if it was thrust upon them. One organist suggested that, despite the popularity of community singing, it was always best to distribute a handful of plants throughout the audience. By the time the medley was over, this author claimed, the organist would be “unable to hear the organ above the voices.”<sup>8</sup> All of the trade commentaries indicated that community singing, while enjoyed by audiences across the country, needed to be carefully sold by the organist.

It might be noted, though, that community singing occasionally took place outside of the organ solo. In 1926, for example, the popular banjo player Eddie Peabody led community singing in theaters across the country as part of his stage act.<sup>9</sup> Comedians,<sup>10</sup> song pluggers,<sup>11</sup> and masters of ceremony<sup>12</sup> also encouraged community

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5 For more on this, see Chapter 4.

6 Clark Fiers, “Playing the Organ Solo,” *Exhibitors Herald*, February 19, 1927, 30.

7 “The Picture House Organist,” *Variety*, October 6, 1928, 34.

8 Harry L. Wagner, “Free Music Slides and Music Store Tie-Ups Are Available in Putting Over Organ Solos,” *Exhibitors Herald*, January 23, 1926, 10.

9 “Eddie Peabody’s First Granada Show Is Well Received; Finale Novel,” *Exhibitors Herald*, March 13, 1926, 51; “Song Plug Hits American,” *Exhibitors Herald*, September 25, 1926, 52.

10 “Norshore,” *Variety*, September 8, 1926, 22.

11 “State,” *Variety*, February 23, 1927, 22.

12 “Embassy, Chicago,” *Variety*, November 17, 1931, 37.

singing from the stage, while orchestra directors led singing from the pit.<sup>13</sup> In 1929, one trade commentator described an entire program of community singing led by the orchestra at the Tivoli theater in Chicago, a practice which he labeled the “orchestral vogue.”<sup>14</sup> Slides were regularly used in conjunction with the orchestra but do not appear to have been employed by visiting performers. Community singing led by the stage band would become especially popular in the 1930s, when organists had largely disappeared from theaters, but it does not appear to have been a significant factor in the 1920s, when the theater organ was still ubiquitous.<sup>15</sup>

### *The Theater Organ*

The theater organ developed with the picture palace. The organ first found a place in the theater because it offered the wide range of tone colors also associated with the orchestra. But the organist had an important advantage over the orchestra, for he could easily improvise film accompaniments.<sup>16</sup> He was also less costly. The first organs were built in the style of church instruments, but a unique theater organ was quickly developed to suit the needs of picture-palace exhibitors.<sup>17</sup> A British organ builder, Robert Hope-Jones, was responsible for most of the innovations behind the theater organ. He died soon after the first picture palaces were built, but his name was linked with the famous Wurlitzer “unit orchestra” organs for many years. A theater organ was defined by a number of characteristics. Some of these were technical, such as electric action, double touch key operation, unification of ranks,

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13 “Academy,” *Variety*, March 23, 1927, 23; “Film House Reviews: State,” *Variety*, May 25, 1927, 24.

14 W.S. Russell, “‘Orchestral Vogue’ Proves Big Bet,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, September 21, 1929, 58.

15 “Fox, Detroit,” *Variety*, October 16, 1935, 23.

16 George Tootell, “The Cinema Aspect,” in *The Complete Organ Recitalist, British and American: Historical, Educational and Descriptive*, edited by Herbert Westerby (London: J.A. Godfrey & Sons, Ltd., 1927), 326-28.

17 Reginald Whitworth, *The Cinema and Theatre Organ: A Comprehensive Description of this Instrument, its Constituent Parts, and its Uses* (London: Musical Opinion, 1932), 104-5.

high wind pressure, and the iconic horseshoe console. Some concerned the sound of the instrument, such as the presence of a tremulant on every rank, the prominence of the tibia voice instead of the diapason, and the incorporation of a complete range of percussion instruments and sound effects.<sup>18</sup> By the 1920s, many theater organs could be operated from several consoles at the same time,<sup>19</sup> and the primary console was usually situated on a lift so that it could rise up from the pit for the organ solo.<sup>20</sup>

As the theater organ became an integral part of the picture-palace experience, exhibitors sought new ways in which to turn their investment into a box office draw. The organ solo soon emerged as a regular picture-palace feature. There is not much information about organ programming before the trade press began to review organ solos in the mid-1920s, but the evidence indicates that the earliest organ solos were of a strictly classical nature. Even after community singing became the norm, many organists continued to present serious art music. Organists were free to draw from both art and popular repertoires, which they often combined in a single solo.<sup>21</sup> Organists also introduced creative additions to the organ solo, such as vocal soloists (often hidden from view), films, costumes, decorations, fanciful lighting schemes,<sup>22</sup> and even miniature stage presentations.<sup>23</sup>

Almost every organ solo employed projected slides, which served several important functions. Most often, slides contained the lyrics to the popular songs performed by the organist. Once again, this did not mean that the audience was expected to join in. Lyric slides were a staple in many houses where community singing was

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18 Whitworth, *The Cinema and Theatre Organ* 1-4.

19 "Double Console Organ Music Featured at Decatur Theatre," *Exhibitors Herald*, May 3, 1924, 98.

20 "Installs Hydraulic Lift for the Organ," *Exhibitors Herald*, March 1, 1924, XXIX.

21 For an example, see: "Organ Solos: Cornelius Maffie," *Exhibitors Herald*, April 30, 1927, 49.

22 Clark Fiers, "Light Values in Organ Solos," *Exhibitors Herald*, September 3, 1927, 17.

23 Albert F. Brown, organist at the Granada and Marbro theaters in Chicago, developed the presentation idea. His idea are detailed in the following article: Will Whitmore, "Brown Tells 'Herald' Readers How to Use Scrimaphone," *Exhibitors Herald*, August 6, 1927, 9.

never practiced, and it was uncommon for an organist to perform popular repertoire without them. The audience knew whether to sing based on the house's custom and on an invitation from the organist. Other slides allowed the organist to communicate with his audience. In the late 1920s, public address systems were introduced into most picture palaces and organists began to speak directly to the public. Before the public address system, however, an organist required slides in order to tell a story, deliver a joke, or give singing directions. The text on these slides was usually set to a well-known tune, which the organist would play. The audience could thus read the text in time to the music.<sup>24</sup> There is some indication that patrons might hum the melody, but it appears that they never sang the words.<sup>25</sup> Finally, slides were used to project frames and backgrounds. These large-format slides were associated with the Brenograph projector and they could be used to create extraordinary effects.<sup>26</sup>

### *The Popularity of Community Singing*

It is difficult to determine just when organ solos began to feature community singing. There is no reliable information about this matter until the trade journal *Exhibitors Herald* launched its weekly "Organ Solos" column in March 1927. This was a significant moment in the history of theater organ entertainment, for it indicated that the organ solo had achieved a high level of national importance. The advent of this new column, however, only indicated the peak of the organ's popularity. Readers had been requesting a column dedicated to organ entertainment for nearly two years,<sup>27</sup> and organ solos had been reviewed under the heading "Current Presentations" since

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24 For an example of these slides and a description of their use, see Albert F. Brown's solo "The Marriage Riddle" in the following article: Walter Hirsch, "Four Arrangements of Organ Solos," *Exhibitors Herald*, September 3, 1927, 18.

25 Harry L. Wagner, "Solo Numbers That Scores With Chicago Audiences," *Exhibitors Herald*, June 12, 1926, 42.

26 Lila King, *Framing the Cinema* (Atlanta: Preservation Maintenance Press, 2000), 9-10.

27 E.E. Bair, "Bair Makes Suggestion for Organists' Idea Exchange Column," *Exhibitors Herald*, October 3, 1925, 63.

November 1925.<sup>28</sup> The other main trade publication for motion-picture exhibitors, *Variety*, discussed organ solos under “House Reviews,” “Presentations,” and “New Acts” from March 1925. *Film Daily* reviewed New York City organ solos, in the context of complete presentations, from 1926. All of these trade journals, with the addition of *Motion Picture News*, published additional articles on organ entertainment and community singing from around the same time.

The “Organ Solos” column in *Exhibitors Herald* provides a glimpse of community singing’s popularity through the years. In April 1927, 18% of the organ solos featured community singing. In April 1928, it was 27%. In 1929, this number rose to 38%, and in 1930 it was 70%. In April 1931, 77% of the organ solos featured community singing. The number eventually fell to 55% in 1932, the last year in which *Exhibitors Herald* published reviews. These statistics, though, have a limited value. They represent only the handful of theaters that the journal chose to review, and the breadth and style of this coverage changed dramatically over the years.

Nonetheless, based on these figures and on additional commentary in the reviews, one may draw two conclusions. First, community singing established a significant presence in the organ solo during the mid-1920s. Most mid-decade reviews refer to the practice, if only to denigrate it or remark upon its absence. Clearly, community singing had already made its mark on the exhibition community. One must remember, though, that organists had a wide variety of entertainment options available. Some historians have developed a nostalgic association between community singing, the “mighty Wurlitzer,” and the glamorous picture palaces of the 1920s, but in reality this iconic image represents the practice in only a minority of theaters.<sup>29</sup>

Second, community singing experienced a dramatic rise in popularity upon the widespread introduction of talking pictures in the late 1920s. This occurred for two

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28 “Presentation Acts,” *Exhibitors Herald*, November 28, 1925, 56.

29 Ben Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1981), 184.

reasons. On the one hand, the inauguration of film sound meant a decrease both in live entertainment and in opportunities for audience participation. Theater patrons were not accustomed to sitting in silence throughout the film, and they often became restless. Patrons also missed the “flesh element” that live musicians and stage performers provided. Community singing provided an opportunity to release excess energy and to engage with the organist, who by 1930 was the only live entertainer to remain in some theaters. On the other hand, the Great Depression changed the landscape of film exhibition. Before the 1930s, picture-palace exhibitors were highly class conscious. As we shall see, those who directed important flagship theaters often prohibited community singing on the grounds that it was not dignified. After the onset of the Depression, however, exhibitors became less concerned with such matters. The top priority in every picture house was to entertain all audiences at a reasonable price.

### *Repertoire and Tone*

During the years in which community singing was a popular organ-solo activity, the organist always grappled with the same set of elements. First, he or she had to choose music for the week’s solo. Each singing session normally consisted of about five popular songs. The organist could choose traditional favorites, recent hits, comical ditties, sentimental ballads, parodies on well-known melodies, vocal tongue-twisters, or any combination of the above. The choice between old and new songs was influenced by the practice of song plugging in the organ solo. If an organist had been pressured to sell music, he would program only recent commodities. The use of sing-along films also had an important influence, since they all featured old songs for copyright reasons. When left to his own devices, an organist usually programmed the music that was most likely to inspire singing: recent hits, but none so recent as to be unfamiliar.

The age variation among picture-palace patrons presented a constant challenge for organists. Trade-press commentators noted that young people didn't know the old songs and weren't able to sing them.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, they worried that older people weren't excited about the jazzy new tunes that constituted the standard community-singing fare, and that community singing therefore appealed only to the "flaming young folks."<sup>31</sup> Some commentators proposed that only the young were interested in community singing, but it is clear that a large spectrum of patrons enjoyed it.<sup>32</sup> For example, the popular Chicago organist Henri Keates explicitly appealed to both "old timers" and "young moderns" when he offered a blend of traditional favorites and "hot tunes."<sup>33</sup> All commentators agreed that an audience would not be able to sing a tune if it was too new.<sup>34</sup> Still, organists had to program new songs in order to satisfy publishers and keep on the cutting edge of musical trends. In order to encourage the audience to sing, an organist would often begin with familiar numbers and introduce a new song only near the end. Commentators observed that this approach produced good results.<sup>35</sup> Harry L. Wagner, an organist in Chicago who contributed a regular column to *Exhibitors Herald*, advised his colleagues to avoid numbers that were "right off the press."<sup>36</sup> Instead, he suggested that they listen to popular dance orchestras, radio programs, and recent phonograph releases in order to have a sense of what music the patrons might know.

Community singing in the picture palace was usually a lighthearted affair. Indeed, it was often side-splittingly comical, and community singing was known to provoke

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30 "Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly?," *Film Daily*, February 21, 1926, 8.

31 William R. Weaver, "Why Not Play the Organs?," *Exhibitors Herald*, July 24, 1926, 42.

32 Denzel Piercy, "PUBLICITY!—for the theatre ORGANIST," *Exhibitors Herald*, October 27, 1928, 32.

33 "Organ Solos: Henri A. Keates," *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, June 23, 1928, 48.

34 Clark Fiers, "Playing the Organ Solo," 23.

35 "Organ Solos: Don Isham," *Exhibitors Herald*, October 1, 1927, 41.

36 Harry L. Wagner, "Free Music Slides and Music Store Tie-Ups," 10.



hilarity among the patrons, even to the point of disrupting the picture-palace program.<sup>37</sup> The comedy was sometimes introduced in the song lyrics themselves. This could happen when the organist programmed a comic song such as “Down By the Winegar Woiks,” a 1925 community singing number that was wildly popular in theaters across the country.<sup>38</sup> More often, however, comedy lyrics were found in parody versions of popular hits (Figure 3.1), lisping choruses (Figure 3.2), and tongue twisters set to familiar melodies (Figure 3.3).

Above all, the comedy lay in the presentation of the sing. The organist might tell a funny story,<sup>39</sup> tell jokes, or build an entire session up to a climactic punch line.<sup>40</sup> He also might give the patrons comical directions, such as to sing different words based on their lot in life (Figure 3.4), to sing two different songs at the same time,<sup>41</sup> to whistle (Figure 3.5), to hum (Figure 3.6), or to clap (Figure 3.7).<sup>42</sup> The organist could also interrupt the singing to comical effect,<sup>43</sup> or plant an accomplice in the audience to cause trouble.<sup>44</sup> Despite all of this, there was still room in some houses for sentiment and loftier musical expression in the community sing. These presentations used most of the same songs but left out the comedy arrangements and gags. In every case an organist had to size up his patrons and then provide the style of entertainment which they enjoyed.

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37 “Organ Solos: Earl and Elsie,” *Exhibitors Herald*, August 9, 1930, 53.

38 “Kahn’s Varied Act Is Best in Months; All Supports Score High,” *Exhibitors Herald*, December 25, 1925, 129.

39 “Organ Solos: Art Thompson,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, February 22, 1930, 57.

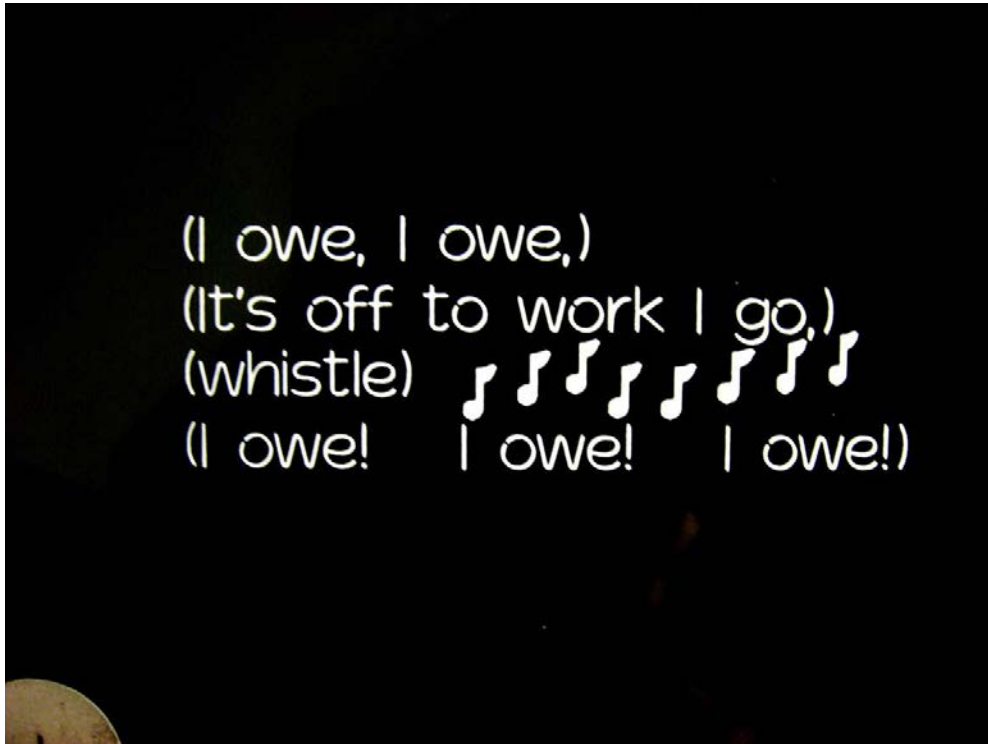
40 “The Organ Club,” *Variety*, August 25, 1926, 25.

41 “Organ Solos: Henri A. Keates,” *Exhibitors Herald*, April 2, 1927, 46.

42 “Pennsylvanians End Successful 7-Week Chicago B. & K. Run,” *Exhibitors Herald*, February 27, 1926, 62.

43 “Organ Solos: Merle Clark and Elsie Thompson,” *Motion Picture Herald*, September 19, 1931, 66.

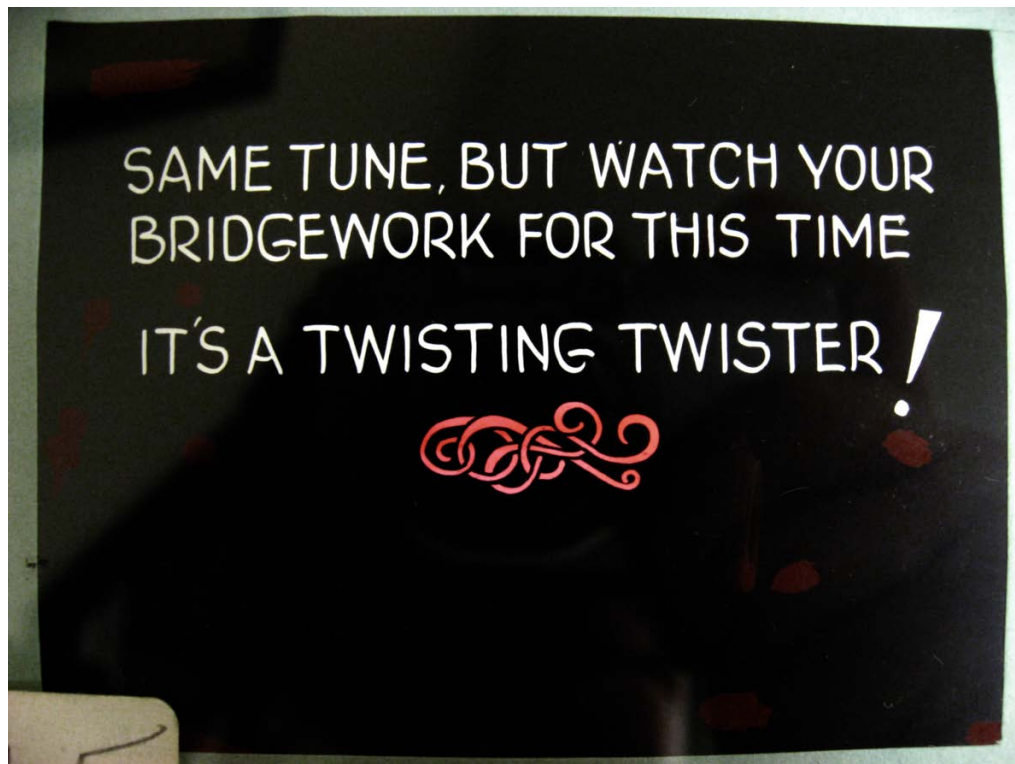
44 Ted Meyn, “The Vocal Lesson,” *Exhibitors Herald*, January 22, 1927, 17.



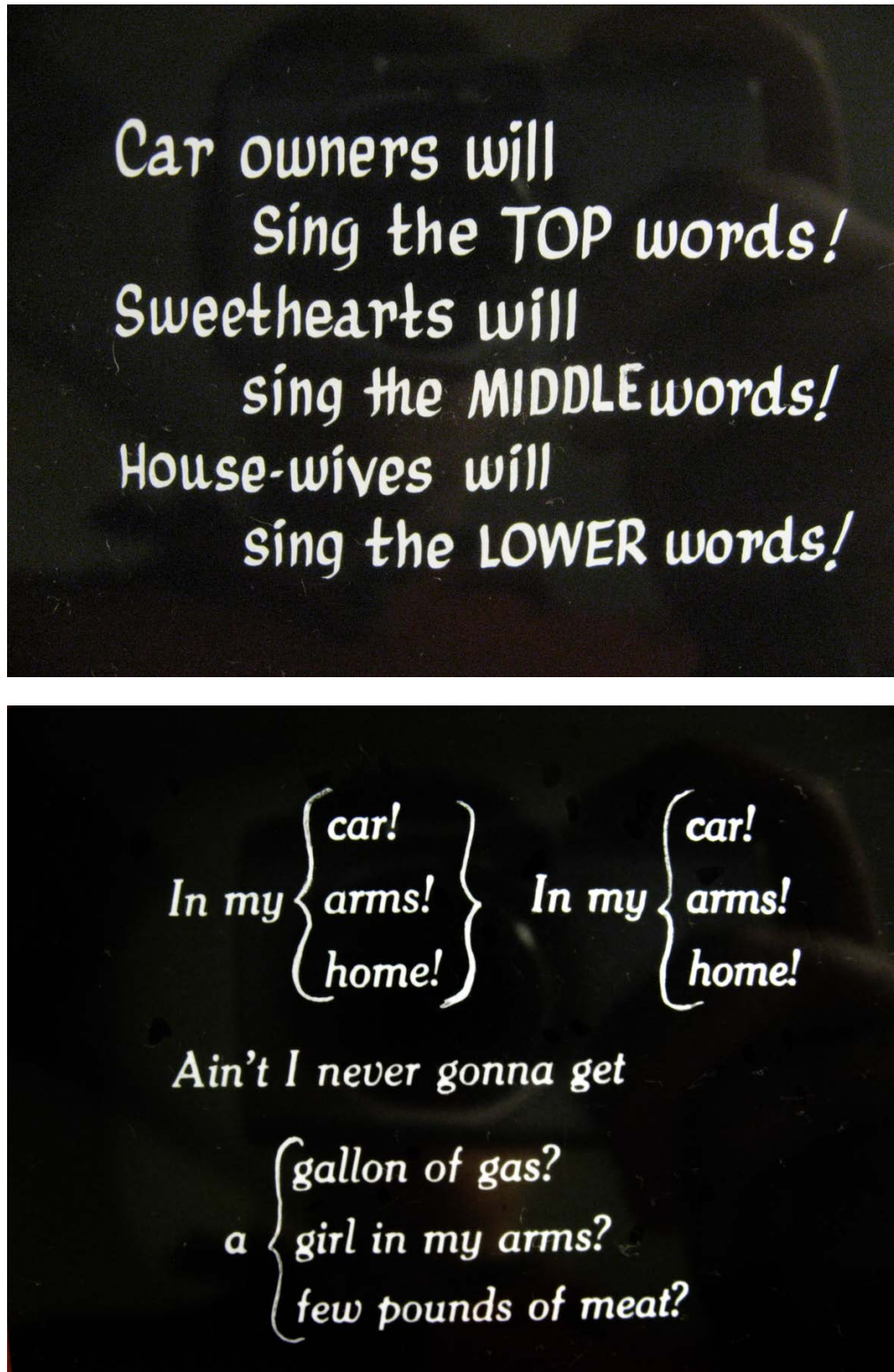
**Figure 3.1:** A parody of the 1937 song “Heigh-Ho.” Courtesy Fox Theatre Archives, Atlanta.



**Figure 3.2:** A lisping version of the 1925 hit “Cecilia.” From the author’s collection.

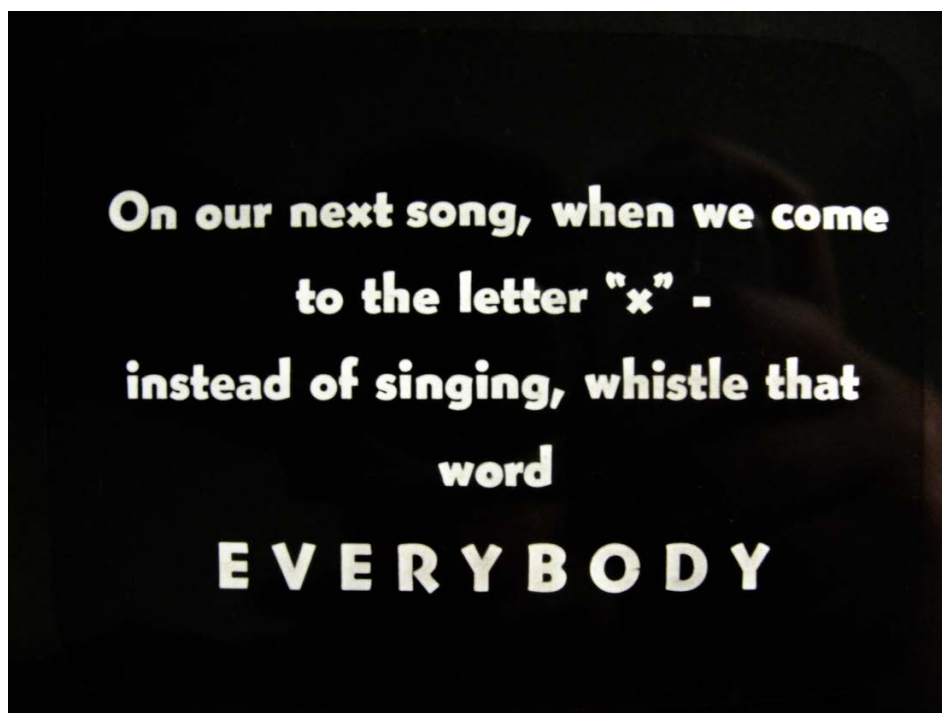


**Figure 3.3:** Tongue twisters supplemented the standard community-singing repertoire. They were enormously popular and always had a humorous effect. Courtesy Fox Theatre Archives, Atlanta.

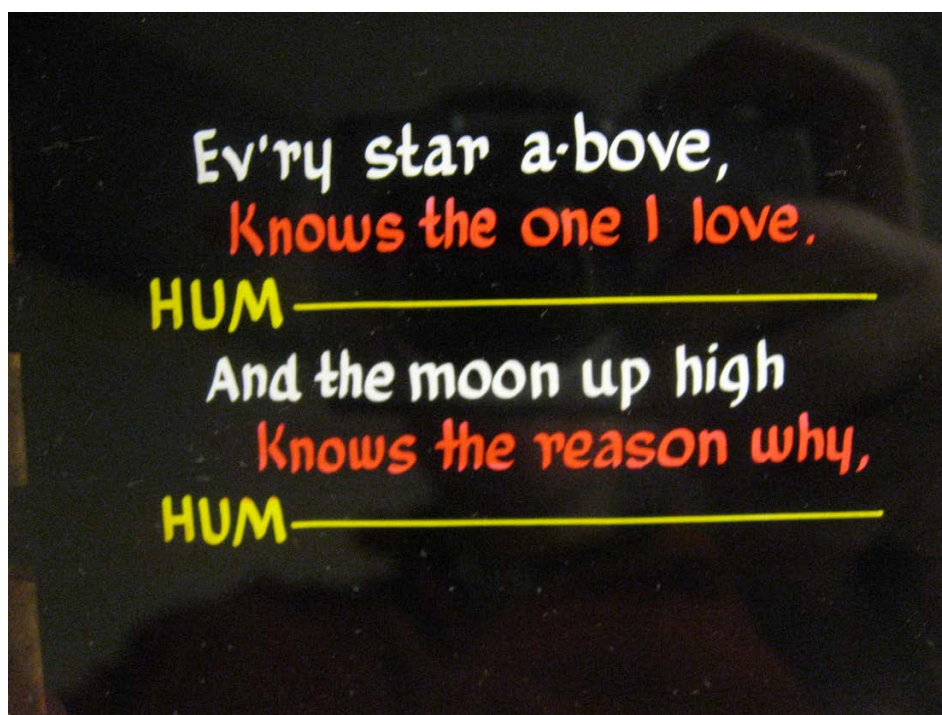


**Figure 3.4:** This parody of the 1937 song “A Sailboat in the Moonlight” asked each patron to choose a line based on his or her lot in life. The result would have been cacophonous—and very amusing. Courtesy Fox Theatre Archives, Atlanta.





**Figure 3.5:** This instructional slide prefaced lyrics for “She’ll be Coming ’Round the Mountain” in which the word “coming” was replaced each time with an “x”. Courtesy Fox Theatre Archives, Atlanta.



**Figure 3.6:** This slide for the 1928 song “Sweet Sue—Just You” replaces the title line with humming. Courtesy Fox Theatre Archives, Atlanta.



**Figure 3.7:** This slide encouraged patrons to clap (and possibly laugh). Courtesy Fox Theatre Archives, Atlanta.

### *Projecting the Lyrics*

Next, the organist had to decide how (and if) to provide the lyrics—by slide or by film. Slides were by far the most popular method. An organist could purchase slides from a dealer, rent them from an exchange (Figures 3.8 and 3.9), accept a free set from a publisher, or create slides specifically for his solo. Some of the larger theaters created sets of slides for their organists on demand, but for most houses this was prohibitively expensive.<sup>45</sup> The appearance of slides varied enormously. The finest commercial sets included illustrations on every slide. Illustrators adorned comic songs with cartoon-style drawings and provided realistic figures and landscapes for sentimental ones. Most slides, however, contained only clear text on a black background. Organists often created their own slides by typing on a sheet of clear plastic (Figure 3.10). Song lyrics on all slides were hyphenated to indicate a note change, so as to aid the participants in the absence of musical notes. A musical staff with notes appeared only occasionally, and then largely for visual effect. Sometimes an organist would abandon slides altogether. When this occurred, it was usually done as a memory test for the participants, in which case the temporary absence of slides provided variety in the organ solo.<sup>46</sup>

In 1928, a *Variety* columnist aptly described the attraction of picture theaters for music publishers: “The picture house with its vast audience over and over each day soon came under the eagle eye of the music men as a song-plugging outlet.”<sup>47</sup> During the 1920s all of the major publishing firms maintained “special service” departments which developed and circulated organ-solo materials. These departments then produced sets of song slides that contained lyrics for their latest numbers. Slide sets were often booked by theater chains and then rotated among the houses along with films and stage shows.<sup>48</sup> Publishers usually offered these slides to organists at no charge

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45 Clark Fiers, “Playing the Organ Solo,” 23.

46 “Organ Solos: Harold Rieder,” *Exhibitors Herald*, March 30, 1929, 55.

47 “The Picture House Organist,” *Variety*, October 6, 1928, 34.

48 *Ibid*, 34.

Week to Week Stunts— **ATTENTION!** —Vocal Variety

**"JIMMY SAVAGE"** **ORGANISTS!**  
offers for RENTAL  
**ORGAN SOLOS**

*The Last Word in Community Singing*  
805 Woods Theatre Building, Chicago, Ill.

Community Comics — Exclusive Rights — Original Organologues

**Figure 3.8:** Jimmy Savage created organ novelties for Chicago theaters. His novelties were used by Henri Keates and Preston Sellers at the Oriental, and by Eddie Meikel at the Chicago Harding. Savage advertised heavily in the trade press and his work was highly considered among organists and exhibitors. This advertisement appeared in an August 1927 issue of *Exhibitors Herald*.

**ORGANISTS**

My Sure-Fire  
"Community Singing Solos"  
are now available for rental. Also  
special organ novelties written to  
order.

Write for Terms

**HARRY I. ROBINSON**  
Suite 807 Woods Theatre Bldg.  
54 W. Randolph St. - Phone Central 6908  
CHICAGO

**ATTENTION  
ORGANISTS  
STOP WORRYING**

Organ Novelties Comedy Choruses  
Gag Slides Tongue Twisters

**I'VE GOT 'EM**  
Also Special Black & White  
Slides for \$1.00 Each  
Material and prices cheerfully submitted

**KAE STUDIOS**  
125 W. 45th St., N. Y. C.

**ORGAN NOVELTIES**  
Parodies and Gag Slides  
RENTAL OR SALE

Special Slides, as Always,  
**\$1.00 and Up**  
Plain and Illustrated

**RANSLEY STUDIOS**  
308 W. Randolph St., Chicago, Ill.

**SUPER  
ORGOLOGUE**  
WITH ILLUSTRATED SLIDES

**"A Literary  
IN DIGESTION"**

Beautifully Hand  
Colored Set -- To  
Make Your Audience  
Laugh and Sing

Order Now!

RENTAL \$5.00  
DEPOSIT 5.00  
TOTAL \$10.00  
POSTAGE EXTRA

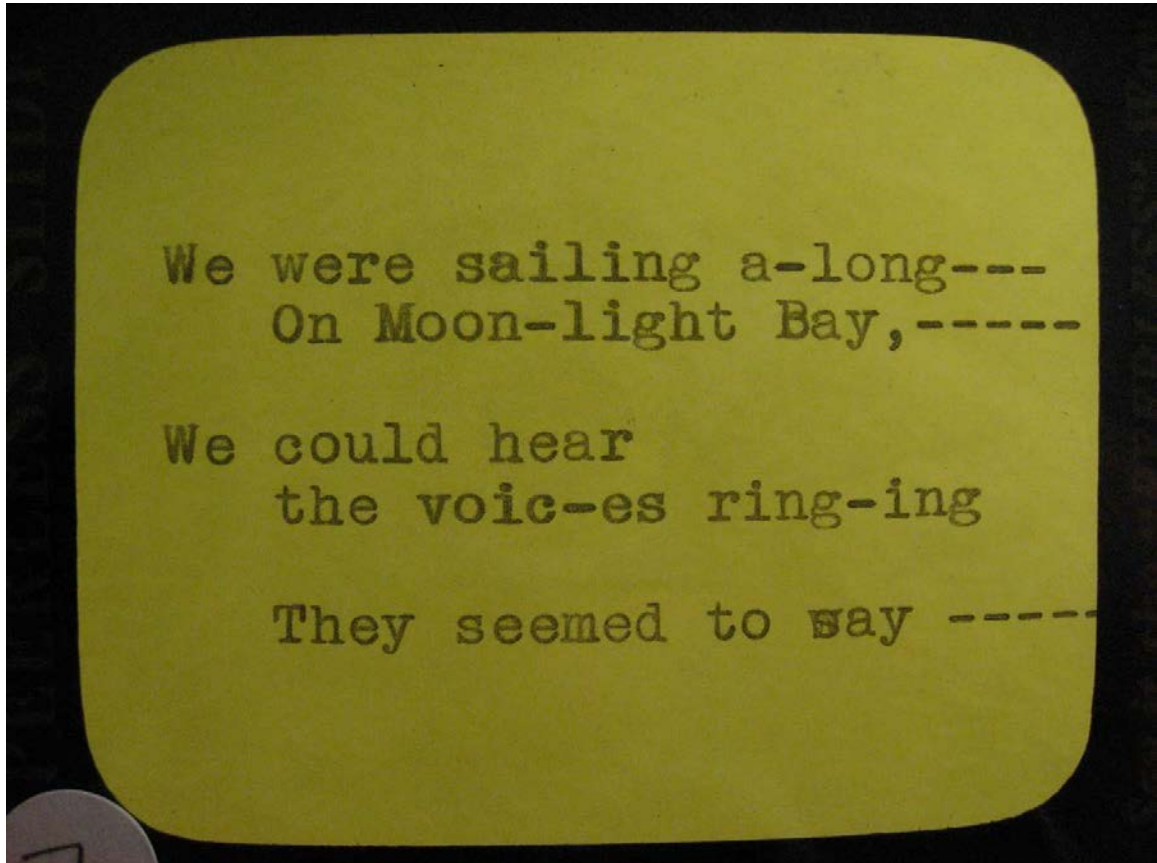
LOLL BENDER, with  
AFTER PRE-SHOWING  
"LITERARY IN DIGESTION"  
TREMENDOUS HIT --  
APPLAUSE SUPPLIED  
THE SHOW

Write for  
cue sheet

**NATIONAL STUDIOS, Inc.**  
226 WEST 56th ST. NEW YORK, N.Y.

**Figure 3.9:** Organ novelties were available from other producers as well. The first three advertisements pictured here appeared in *Exhibitors Herald-World* in 1929 and 1930. The last is from a July 1931 issue of *Motion Picture Herald*.





**Figure 3.10:** With a typewriter and a sheet of plastic, any organist could create song slides on demand. Courtesy Fox Theatre Archives, Atlanta.

in return for the publicity.<sup>49</sup> The organists were expected to return the expensive slides so that they could be reused, although the presence of these slides in theater collections confirms the publishers' complaint that they were often kept.<sup>50</sup>

Publishers such as M. Witmark & Sons,<sup>51</sup> De Sylva, Brown & Henderson,<sup>52</sup> and Remick<sup>53</sup> described their slide offerings with full-column advertisements in the *Exhibitors Herald-World* (Figure 3.11). Most of the slide sets mentioned in these advertisements contained only single songs, the verses and choruses of which were distributed across a handful of slides, but some included a narrative as well (Figures 3.12.1 and 3.12.2). In some cases, a narrative connected several song texts. On average, these sets contained 32 slides. In 1926, however, Henry Murtagh used a set of 50 song slides released by Leo Feist, Inc. The set exploited five different Feist songs and was the work of L. Wolfe Gilbert, a "special material expert" at Feist.<sup>54</sup> Publishers also released slide sets that combined new and old material. In these medleys, choruses from old favorites that had no commercial value would introduce a new song that the company wanted to sell.<sup>55</sup> Finally, a publisher would sometimes alter the lyrics to one of his own songs in order to suit an organ presentation. In 1926, Feist released a set of slides for the song "Too Many Parties, Too Many Pals," which incorporated an address supposedly given by a judge from his bench (the subject of the song, a fallen woman, was to be sentenced for her crimes). To heighten the impact of the address, Feist put

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49 "Plans Community Song Fest," *Exhibitors Herald*, June 21, 1924, xxvi. This source, along with many others, emphasizes that publishers will only provide free slides to a theater that can demonstrate its ability to plug songs effectively (see also Harry L. Wagner, "Free Music Slides and Music Store Tie-Ups," 10).

50 "Music Men Seek Fair Treatment," *Exhibitors Herald*, February 4, 1928, 47.

51 "Advertisement," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, June 8, 1929, 50.

52 "Advertisement," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, February 9, 1929, 58.

53 "Advertisement," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, March 9, 1929, 44.

54 "Inside Stuff," *Variety*, September 29, 1926, 51.

55 Wagner, "Free Music Slides and Music Store Tie-Ups Are Available," 10.

<p><b>ORGAN PRESENTATIONS OF GREAT SONGS</b></p> <hr/> <p><b>SMALL SLIDE SETS</b></p> <p><b>-MY SIN- MEAN TO ME OLD FASHIONED LADY BUTTON UP YOUR OVERCOAT I'LL NEVER ASK FOR MORE THE SONG I LOVE WHEN THE WORLD IS AT REST SALLY OF MY DREAMS</b> (Theme of "Mother Knows Best")</p> <p><b>MY TONIA</b> (Theme of "In Old Arizona")</p> <p><b>TRUE HEAVEN</b> (Theme of "True Heaven")</p> <hr/> <p>We Also Have Chorus Sets for All of These Songs, As Well As a Few Not Listed</p> <hr/> <p><b>SPECIALS</b></p> <p><b>"ROMANCE AND MELODY"</b> Introducing <b>THE SONG I LOVE</b> (A Presentation That Is a Classic)</p> <p><b>"OPEN SECRETS"</b> Introducing <b>THAT'S HOW I FEEL ABOUT YOU</b> (Perfect for Community)</p> <hr/> <p><i>Write for All Slides and Information to</i> <b>SAM LERNER, Mgr. of Publicity</b> <b>DE SYLVA, BROWN &amp; HENDERSON, INC.</b> 745 7th Ave., New York City</p>	<p><b>WITMARK</b></p> <p><b>SONG SLIDE ORGAN PRESENTATIONS</b></p> <hr/> <p><b>SMALL SETS</b></p> <p><b>LADY DIVINE</b> (Theme Ballad "DIVINE LADY")</p> <p><b>YOU AND I IN THE MOONLIGHT DANCE OF THE PAPER DOLLS HONEST</b> (I'm in Love with You)</p> <p><b>MAYBE—WHO KNOWS I'VE NEVER SEEN A SMILE LIKE YOURS</b> (Theme Song of "ALIBI")</p> <hr/> <p><b>EXTRA</b></p> <p>Please Note: Hit Songs for Theatres Equipped with Sound <b>VITAPHONE RECORDS</b> and Slides Verse and Choruses for the Following</p> <p><b>YOU AND I IN THE MOONLIGHT MAYBE—WHO KNOWS HONEST</b> (I'm in Love with You)</p> <hr/> <p><b>SPECIALS</b></p> <p><b>"THE SINGING BALLGAME"</b> (A MUSICAL NOVELTY) By Sam Server</p> <hr/> <p><b>A MUSICAL THOUGHT ABOUT MOTHERS</b> FEATURING <b>WONDERFUL MOTHER OF MINE</b> By Herb Magidson Good for Every Day in the Year</p> <hr/> <p>Write for Slides and Information to <b>JIMMY CLARK, Mgr.</b> Organ &amp; Song Slide Dep't 321 West 44th Street, New York</p> <hr/> <p><b>M. WITMARK &amp; SONS</b> 1650 Broadway NEW YORK</p>
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**Figure 3.11:** These two advertisements were published in *Exhibitors Herald-World* in May 1929. Multiple advertisements in this style appeared in every issue of the *Herald* during the late 1920s.





**Figure 3.12.1:** This set of slides for the 1926 hit “On the Tamiami Trail” was recommended by organist Harry L. Wagner of the Chicago Empress. Wagner, who contributed regularly to the *Exhibitors Herald*, proclaimed that this “special version,” released by the publishing house of Remick, “should go over very good in any house” (Wagner, “Solo Numbers That Scored With Chicago Audiences,” 41). From the author’s collection.





**Figure 3.12.2:** The second half of Remick's "On the Tamiami Trail." From the author's collection.

the final chorus in the past tense.<sup>56</sup>

Organists typically felt free to alter commercial slides for their own use. The organist might interpolate his audience's favorite songs or replace worn-out numbers with up-to-date hits. Organists also broke up commercial medleys to use the songs individually, and they often added singing instructions to the slides or changed existing instructions (Figure 3.13). Sometime organists reused old slides in new ways (Figure 3.14), or removed texts for reasons that are difficult to decipher (Figure 3.15).<sup>57</sup>

Organists also developed their own specialties, often in collaboration with a publisher or slide producer. In 1927, organist Ted Meyn of the Pantages theater in Kansas City, Missouri, devised a clever setting for the recent hit "What's the Use of Crying." Meyn began his solo by playing a verse and chorus of the tune with lyrics projected on the screen. Then, during the second verse, a plant in the audience began to sing "out of key, loud, mournful and very sour."<sup>58</sup> After a second interruption, Meyn asked the man to please remain quiet. The plant begged Meyn to teach him how to sing, and the organist obliged with a series of slides containing solfege. After leading the plant through his vocal exercises, Meyn invited him to sing a chorus of "What's the Use of Crying" for the crowd. In his column for *Exhibitors Herald*, Meyn informed his readers that his presentation was now available from the publisher of the song at no cost.<sup>59</sup>

In 1930, *Variety* announced that publishers had lost interest in plugging their songs via song slide, since the expense was "estimated to run into the thousands" and the effect had been dampened by sound films (many theaters did not retain

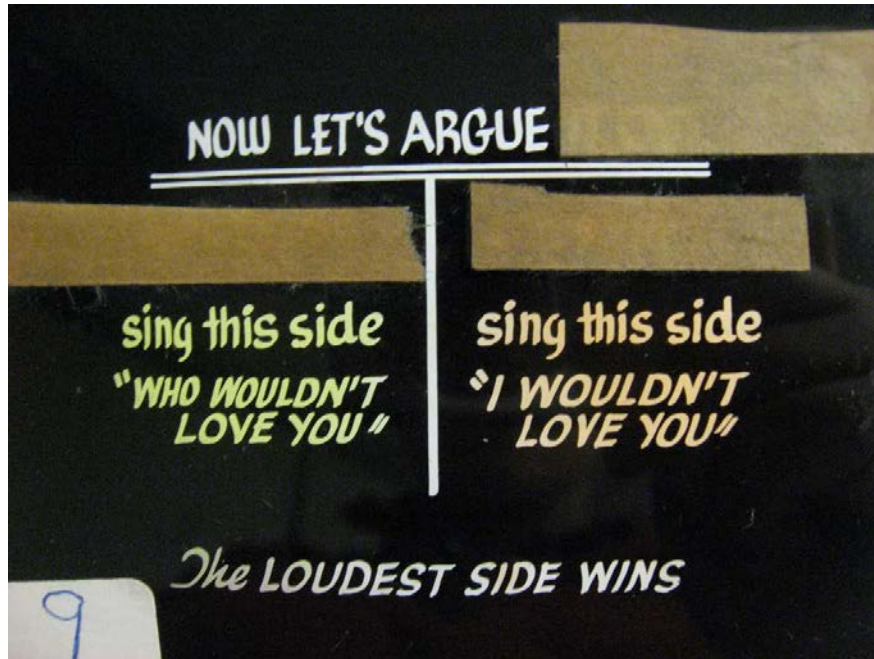
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56 Wagner, "Solo Numbers That Scored With Chicago Audiences," 41. The judge's address was supposed to be delivered by an actor on stage, not sung or even necessarily read by the audience. Publishers often supplied scripts to accompany their slide sets, if appropriate. This melodramatic song and address were well-suited to a "class" house.

57 All of these practices are well represented in the slide collection at the Atlanta Fox theater.

58 Ted Meyn, "The Vocal Lesson," 17.

59 *Ibid.*, 17.



**Figure 3.13:** In this slide, the organist has removed the text “Upstairs” and “Downstairs.” Presumably, he provided singing directions via some other medium. He has also stricken the text “It Out” from the header, although it is not clear why. Courtesy Fox Theatre Archives, Atlanta.



**Figure 3.14:** In this slide, the organist has removed the title of the song, “In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree.” He might have used this slide to preface the singing of another old favorite. Courtesy Fox Theatre Archives, Atlanta.





**Figure 3.15:** The organist has removed the text “First on the Hit Parade some months ago—Now you never hear it much—.” Perhaps he had been playing the song frequently and the comment was inappropriate for his audience. Courtesy Fox Theatre Archives, Atlanta.



an organist).<sup>60</sup> A 1929 *Variety* article proclaimed that organists were only the 6th most valuable plugging outlet after talking films, radio, bands, discs, and acts.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, however, the national exhibitor-producers were taking control of organ-solo development. By the early 1930s all of the major chains had established centralized organ departments. At Paramount, Mr. Boris Morros was in charge of the creation and distribution of organ solos for all Paramount organists. "Cooperating with the publishers in plugging their songs," however, remained an important part of Morros's job.<sup>62</sup> At RKO, Dan Parker was in charge of organ solos. In 1923 Parker published a complete description of his duties in the *Herald* in which he emphasized the collaborative nature of organ-solo production, the central role of music publishers, the tight schedule on which organists worked, and the freedom with which organists tailored the solos to their audiences.<sup>63</sup>

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60 "Screen Slide Plugging Out!," *Variety*, March 19, 1930, 65.

61 They were ranked above only musicals and night clubs ("Talkers Stand 1st as Song Plug, Acts Now Rank Nearly Last; Radio 2d, With Reservation," *Variety*, November 27, 1929).

62 Ed Dawson, "Publix Has Organist Service Station," *Motion Picture Herald*, March 28, 1931, 61.

63 Dan Parker, "Preparing Organ Solos For The Circuit," *Motion Picture Herald*, February 13, 1932, 28:

My writer and myself discuss an idea for an organ presentation. (An "organ solo" does not mean enough.) The idea must appeal to audiences everywhere. The topic must be appreciated by all of our varied audiences. Then again, it must be flexible for different types of work. Religion, prohibition or other controversial subjects cannot enter into any organ presentation, for we endeavor to serve *all*. Music, a very important item is next. Songs, which the publishers are exploiting and which are appropriate, are selected. The writer now has his foundation.

When he returns with the finished product, a few minor changes are probably made, then it is ready for the okay. The presentation is then discussed with the general music director. By him it is either rejected or accepted. If accepted, the work goes on.

While music for the parodies is being obtained, the lantern slide manufacturer and his artist are called in. The writer, the manufacturer, his artist and myself take infinite care in the next step. Each slide is gone over, cartoons are thought of and drawn. When the slide man has the proper information, he is off. In a day or so, I received hand-painted cards. This gives me an idea of just what the slide will look like. These are okayed and the slides are delivered.

Sufficient sets of slide, music and cue-sheets are made ready for the theatres. Now for the routing. Popular music is soon forgotten, therefore the presentations must be played very soon. Few presentations can be used after six or seven weeks. This being the case, the theatres are grouped for such a purpose, bearing in mind that the geographical location of each is of vital importance.

Throughout the 1920s an organist also had the option of projecting lyrics via silent film. Sing-along films were usually obtained from a distributor, but some organists produced their own. A few publishers produced sing-along films. These films have not survived, however, and there is little information about them in the trade press. It appears that publishers' films contained live-action scenes and that the words faded in on these scenes as necessary.<sup>64</sup> The film used by Henri Keates in 1921 to accompany the song "Why, Dear?" might have been of this sort.<sup>65</sup> By 1926, publishers' song films were described as "passé."<sup>66</sup>

Far more prominent were the films released by production companies. These films were not intended to advertise songs. Instead, they were marketed to theaters as entertainment and rented in the same manner as other short subjects. In the 1920s, two series of silent sing-along films were available for organists to use: Educational's *Sing Them Again* (1923–24) and Red Seal's *Ko-Ko Song Car-Tunes* (1924–27). Both series featured classic American songs, including Stephen Foster and early Tin Pan Alley hits. Educational, however, accompanied medleys of choruses with nostalgic live-action scenes, whereas Red Seal set entire songs against backdrops of animated gags. All of these films could be screened with orchestral accompaniment (each *Song Car-Tune* reel arrived at the theater complete with an eighteen-piece orchestration<sup>67</sup>), but organists often used them in place of song slides (Figure 3.16).<sup>68</sup>

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64 Harry L. Wagner, "Free Music Slides and Music Store Tie-Ups Are Available," 10.

65 "Feature Song on Film," *Music Trade Review*, November 12, 1921, 47.

66 Wagner, "Solo Numbers That Scores With Chicago Audiences," 42.

67 Edwin Miles Fadman, "Music and Shorts," *Film Daily*, September 20, 1925, 35.

68 "Advertisement," *Exhibitors Herald*, November 7, 1925, 47; "Organ Solos: Milton Charles," *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, March 3, 1928, 45

**EVERYBODY'S BOOKING**  
*St. Patrick's Day Special*  
*Week of March 14th*  
*Fleischer Ko-Ko Song Car-Tune*  
**"HAS ANYBODY HERE SEEN KELLY?"**  
*Hand Colored by Brock*

729 7th Ave.  N. Y. C.

**DISTRIBUTORS**

**LOOK!**

*"Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly?"*



**BOOK!**

For Week of March 14th  
*St. Patrick's Day Special*

One of Max Fleischer's Great Ko-Ko  
*Song Car-Tunes*  
*Hand Colored By Brock'*

  
 729—7th Ave., N. Y. C.  
**DISTRIBUTORS**

**ON BROADWAY**  
*Famous Players*  
**RIVOLI**  
*a KO-KO SONG CAR-TUNE*  
**"Ta-Ra-Ra Boom Der E"**  
*playing this week*  
*a MARVEL OF MOTION*  
*Played last week*

729 7th Ave.  N. Y. C.  
 Edwin Miles Fadman, Pres.

**NOW BOOKING**  
*St. Patrick's Day Special*  
*Week of March 14th*  
*Fleischer Ko-Ko Song Car-Tune*  
**"HAS ANYBODY HERE SEEN KELLY"**  
*Hand Colored by Brock*

729 7th Ave., N. Y. C.  
**DISTRIBUTORS**

*Max Fleischer's Ko-Ko Song Car-Tune*  
**"DOLLY GRAY"**  
*Last Week Played New York*  
**CAPITOL**

  
 729 7th Ave., N. Y. C.  
**DISTRIBUTORS**

**What Others Think**

8.

**MISSOURI THEATRE:**  
*"Have used your Ko-Ko Song Car-Tunes as Featured Organ Solos and want to say they pleased the audience immensely."*  
*—Milton Slosser, Organist.*

729 7th Ave.  N. Y. C.  
 Edwin Miles Fadman, Pres.

**What Others Think**

9.

**EDWARD L. HYMAN**  
*Managing Director Brooklyn Strand*  
*"Your Ko-Ko Song Car-Tunes and Out-of-the-Inkwell subjects have struck a responsive chord in our audiences that spells satisfaction. They are novel and altogether entertaining."*

729 7th Ave.  N. Y. C.  
 Edwin Miles Fadman, Pres.

**What Others Think**

14

**GEORGE DAVIS**  
*Manager Stadium Theatre, Brooklyn, writes:*  
*"'DAISY BELL' Song Car-Tune . . . tremendous success. Patrons applauded for five minutes.*  
*"One of the best short subjects I have ever played."*

729 7th Ave.  N. Y. C.  
 Edwin Miles Fadman, Pres.

**Figure 3.16:** These eight advertisements appeared in *Exhibitors Herald* in 1925 and 1926. Note the plug from Milton Slosser, a renowned theater organist who led community singing with slides and films. The remaining advertisements attest to the widespread popularity of the *Song Car-Tune* films.

### *Presenting the Sing*

Organists who led community singing had many options available when they designed their organ solos. In most cases the organist did not put much effort into crafting a unique presentation. Instead, he would provide a generic title for the solo—something like “Let’s Sing,”<sup>69</sup> “Let’s Sing and Be Happy,”<sup>70</sup> or “It’s Time to Sing”<sup>71</sup>—and then lead his patrons in a string of unrelated tunes. On other occasions an organist might use a simple idea or theme to tie the songs together. Sometimes, however, an organist would provide a complete narrative for his community sing. He might tell a story,<sup>72</sup> take his patrons on a virtual trip around the world,<sup>73</sup> or direct his audience to accomplish some imagined task through song.<sup>74</sup>

Whatever theme or narrative an organist provided, he always had additional strategies available which could be interpolated into any sing. The most widespread was to divide the audience into competitive units (Figure 3.17). Common divisions were men against women,<sup>75</sup> single patrons against those who were married,<sup>76</sup> and balcony seating against orchestra.

Some organists became quite creative with their competitive sings. New York organist Leo Weber, for example, pitted “fatties” against “slenders.”<sup>77</sup> The practice of competitive singing—which was directed by annotations on the slides—helped to build enthusiasm in every theater and usually added to the humor as well. Dividing the audience into singing groups, however, did not necessarily imply competition.

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69 “Organ Solos: Don Williams,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, July 5, 1930, 51.

70 “Organ Solos: Dougherty,” *Motion Picture Herald*, March 28, 1931, 65.

71 “Organ Solos: Arlo Hults,” *Motion Picture Herald*, May 9, 1931, 50.

72 “Organ Solos: Henri Keates,” *Exhibitors Herald*, August 27, 1927, 48.

73 “Organ Solos: Bill Meeder,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, April 26, 1930, 50.

74 “Organ Solos: Edmund C. Fitch,” *Exhibitors Herald*, June 25, 1927, 41.

75 “Organ Solos: Preston Sellers,” *Exhibitors Herald*, July 16, 1927, 42.

76 “Organ Solos: Bob West,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, September 14, 1929, 53.

77 “Organ Solos: Leo Weber,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, April 5, 1930, 51.



**Figure 3.17:** This instructional slide could be used to preface any song that divided the audience. Courtesy Fox Theatre Archives, Atlanta.

Division could also cast audience members in different roles to achieve a theatrical effect (Figures 3.18 and 3.19) or to produce four-part harmony.<sup>78</sup>

The organist also had other methods for enlivening the sing. These usually made participation more difficult—and therefore more amusing. Sometimes an organist would quit playing until the audience could no longer keep together.<sup>79</sup> (This practice particularly appalled critics of community singing, who saw silence as the ultimate offense to the organ.) The organist might also provide a subversive accompaniment to challenge his patrons' musical ability. One such approach was to change keys every few measures (Figure 3.20). And sometimes the challenge lay in simply reading the slides (Figures 3.21 and 3.22).

Finally, the organist could garnish a community singing solo with console decorations, costumes, or even actors. Organist Art Thompson of Clarksburg, West Virginia, for example, once placed prison bars around his console and engaged an assistant to play the role of armed prison guard. After sounding a shot the guard chased Thompson, dressed in prison stripes, to his console. Thompson played a few measures of “The Prisoner’s Song” and then begged the audience to secure his release by singing the recent hit “My Fate is in Your Hands.”<sup>80</sup> Thompson was not the only organist to stage this routine, but he added his own touches to make it unique.<sup>81</sup> Some organists also employed illustrative film segments. These were not sing-along films but rather visual effects to enhance the organ solo.<sup>82</sup>

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78 “Organ Solos: Henri Keates,” *Exhibitors Herald*, *Exhibitors Herald*, March 19, 1927, 36.

79 Loop, “Film House Reviews: Oriental (Chicago),” *Variety*, November 24, 1926, 23.

80 “Organ Solos: Art Thompson,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, April 26, 1930, 50.

81 For another version of the same solo, see: “Organ Solos: Herbie Koch,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, April 12, 1930, 67.

82 “Organ Solos: ‘Guss’ Farney,” *Motion Picture Herald*, January 23, 1932, 69.

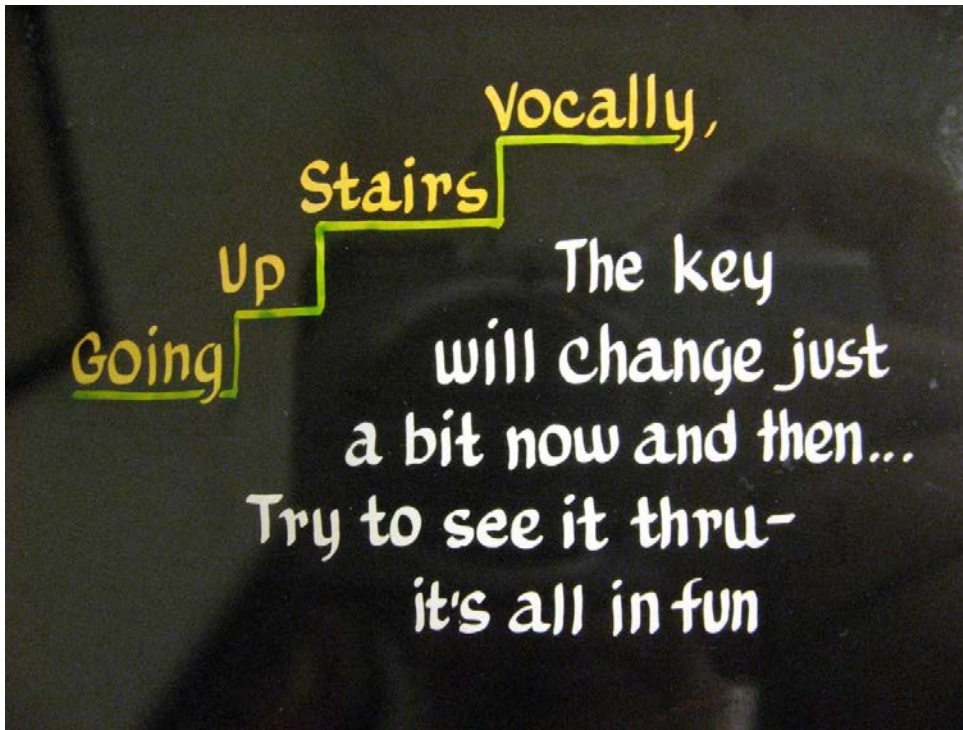


**Figure 3.18:** This instructional slide prefaced a special version of the 1910 classic “Let Me Call You Sweetheart.” Courtesy Fox Theatre Archives, Atlanta.



**Figure 3.19:** In this special version of “Let Me Call You Sweetheart,” the boys sang the original lyrics while the girls interpolated new, up-to-date lines. The loudness of the boys’ lyrics was indicated by the capital letters. Later, the boys and girls switched roles. Courtesy Fox Theatre Archives, Atlanta.





**Figure 3.20:** This slide warned the audience that the organist was going to repeatedly change keys during the song. Courtesy Fox Theatre Archives, Atlanta.



**Figure 3.21:** These graphic puzzle slides were popular. This one contains the opening lyrics of the 1892 song "Daisy Bell." Courtesy Fox Theatre Archives, Atlanta.





**Figure 3.22:** This graphic slide is a bit more difficult to decipher. It contains the text to the 1903 barbershop classic “Sweet Adeline.” Several graphic versions of this text were produced. Courtesy Fox Theatre Archives, Atlanta.

### *Self-Presentation*

The organist also had to take his personal appearance and demeanor into account. The organ solo contributed to the overall fantasy that picture-palace entertainment promised, and the organist had to be careful not to dispel the illusion. In most theaters, the fantasy included a sense of informal intimacy and friendship between the performers and the patrons. The elements of appearance and demeanor always had to reflect the character of the theater, and some venues called for a more formal persona. In a 1932 trade-press article, organist Ted Crawford noted that a tuxedo might be appropriate for an elite house while a dark suit or sport clothes were preferable for most venues. Crawford provided a simple rule that governed the selection of apparel for any theater: “The organist should dress primarily to make people want to like him the minute the spot hits him.”<sup>83</sup>

Organists also had to consider their bodily motions when not seated at the console. Writing in 1927, organist Clark Fiers considered the problem of awkward bowing to be so severe that he offered precise instructions for the correct execution of a bow. Fiers also implored the organist to smile. “Let them think that you are having as much fun as they are,” he writes, “and they will eat it up.”<sup>84</sup> Fiers warned the organist, however, against any affectation and recommended the same casual attitude that Ted Crawford extolled.

Beginning in the late 1920s most organists had to take even more care with their speech than their dress. Crawford’s rule for speech, published in 1932, echoes that for appearance: “In speaking to the audience, one should indicate an attitude that says as simply and sincerely as possible, ‘I like you and I want you to like me’.”<sup>85</sup> The speaking organist was well-equipped to present himself to the audience as a friend, and many

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83 Ted Crawford, “The Organ Solo As An Interlude,” *Motion Picture Herald*, October 22, 1932, 10, 28.

84 Clark Fiers, “Playing the Organ Solo,” 30.

85 *Ibid.*, 10, 28.

were successful in developing close—if illusory—relationships with their patrons.<sup>86</sup> Spoken words, of course, became possible only when public address systems were installed in theaters in and around 1927.<sup>87</sup> This development also allowed the singing organist to emerge, and a handful of performers developed a reputation for singing to their own accompaniment during the organ solo.<sup>88</sup>

### *Effects on the Audience*

Obviously, exhibitors were programming community singing in order to entertain, but they were aware that it had other effects on the audience as well. In particular, community singing built a sense of community.<sup>89</sup> To begin with, exhibitors used singing to put the audience in a good mood for the film<sup>90</sup> or the other acts.<sup>91</sup> Patrons, it seems, became more receptive to the picture-palace entertainment that was to follow after a round of community singing. The reasons are clear enough. First, and quite simply, the community singing was fun, exciting, and promoted good humor among the patrons. Second, community singing helped the audience to feel as if they belonged to the picture-palace community. After the warmth of a community singing session, patrons began to perceive the stage entertainers as personal friends instead of anonymous professionals.

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86 For more on this, see Chapter 5.

87 For the first mention of an organist speaking with the aid of a public address system, see: "Organ Solos: Don Isham," *Exhibitors Herald*, August 6, 1927, 49. For another early account, see: "New Device Invented For Organists by Anthony," *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, October 13, 1928, 45.

88 These included the pioneer Emil Velazco ("Novel Organ Solo Work," *Motion Picture News*, February 14, 1925, 693), "Symphonic" Hawley ("Organ Solos: Symphonic Hawley," *Exhibitors Herald*, March 19, 1927, 36), Elsie Thompson ("Organ Solos: Elsie Thompson," *Motion Picture Herald*, March 21, 1931, 62), and Milton Charles ("Stanley, J.C.," *Variety*, December 1, 1931, 33).

89 Ed Dawson, "Publix Has Organist Service Station," 61: "It is an established fact that community singing creates an intimate, 'get-together' atmosphere in a theatre, the institutional value of which cannot be underrated."

90 "Ruth Brewer Flops; Western Quartette Hits," *Exhibitors Herald*, February 27, 1926, 60.

91 "Chicago Oriental," *Exhibitors Herald*, September 25, 1926, 53

### Chapter 3. Community Singing During the Organ Solo

Exhibitors were also aware that community singing helped patrons to forget their cares. This became increasingly important in the 1930s, when most patrons desired a momentary escape from often-difficult lives.<sup>92</sup> Organist Eddie Meikel observed that Americans had also used community singing to lift downtrodden spirits during the Great War. He found that community singing in the theater cheered participants just as it had in the camps.<sup>93</sup> In addition, exhibitors noted that community singing encouraged their patrons to be more polite to one another. One columnist from 1930 suggested that once audience members began to sing together they realized that they “are among other people like themselves, there to have a good time.”<sup>94</sup> Patrons then experienced the feeling of belonging to a sympathetic community, and they behaved with courtesy as a result. In the age of talking pictures, the issue of courtesy became very important. Early sound systems were mediocre, and patrons had to maintain perfect silence in order to understand the dialogue. In the early 1930s, therefore, commentators redoubled their effort to urge community singing as a means to promote social harmony within the audience.<sup>95</sup> Patrons were sometimes distressed by the requirement that they remain silent through a talking film. Organist Dale Young found in 1930 that community singing was also useful after the feature film, since it allowed the audience to engage with the entertainment and, finally, make some noise.<sup>96</sup>

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92 Ed Dawson, “Loew Organists Given Big Billing,” *Motion Picture Herald*, October 10, 1931, 75.

93 “Well, Organists, What About It?,” *Exhibitors Herald*, October 9, 1926, 54.

94 “Organs and Courtesy,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, November 22, 1930, 18.

95 W.S. Russell, “Singing Popular with Audiences,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, September 13, 1930, 58, 61.

96 “Organ Solos: Dale Young,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, December 20, 1930, 57.

### *The Audience Perspective*

By most accounts, patrons enjoyed community singing enormously. The clearest evidence of community singing's popularity is that it persevered in the picture palace for over a decade, despite constant opposition from certain quarters of the exhibition trade. Chicago organist Eddie Meikel, writing to his peers, explained as early as 1926 why the practice could not and should not be eliminated: "Regardless of what you and I may think of community singing stunts as entertainment, one thing is certain in my mind, and that is that the audiences at the present time want them, and enjoy them."<sup>97</sup> Other commentators also noted the overwhelming popularity of the practice,<sup>98</sup> and exhibitors regularly reported a high demand for community singing to the trade press.<sup>99</sup>

First-hand accounts of community singing do exist, although they are scarce. In 1930, the *Chicago Daily Times* interviewed six theatergoers about their experiences with community singing. The responses provide an unusual perspective on the practice: that of the participating audience member. While the six interviews constitute a miniscule sample, they provide a coherent picture of the community-singing experience:

The women's answers come first. Here they are.

"The theatre is a place of amusement, and I have a great time singing with the rest of the people. Singing alone I would feel bashful, but when everybody is singing, I am braver. I prefer to sing the latest songs, and enjoy every new one more when I hear a great number of people singing it. It sounds like opera."

"I think singing with the audience in the theatre is loads of fun and at the same time we are receiving singing lessons. Most people just can't resist singing in the theatres, because everybody else is singing. It makes people more friendly and everyone is happy. Sometimes it reminds me of singing in church. Everyone from the smallest to the tallest is singing."

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97 "Well, Organists, What About It?," 54.

98 Wagner, "Free Music Slides and Music Store Tie-Ups," 10.

99 W.J. Kress, "Untitled Letter," *Exhibitors Herald*, February 6, 1926, 64.

### *Chapter 3. Community Singing During the Organ Solo*

“Singing with the audiences in the theatres is one of my favorite sports. It affords an opportunity for everyone to exercise their vocal cords and have lots of fun at the same time. Whenever I go to a theatre and the audience sings to the music of the organ I feel at home because everyone is singing and I have my exercise too.”

And now we hear from the men.

“Although I am not a frequent visitor to the theatre, every time I do go, and the audience is singing, I try to do my best, too. It is all in fun, and usually the organist has some funny songs up his sleeve which makes everybody laugh. Even when I do not feel like singing I do just the same, because I do not like to appear different from other people.”

“I enjoy singing with the audience in theatres. It is a maker of fraternity, and gives the more backward ones more confidence to express their pleasure. It also gives occasion to people who have no other opportunity to participate in what we call congregational singing in churches. Let the theatres keep it up, louder and funnier.”

“It gives me a great deal of pleasure to sing with the audience in theatres or at any other gathering where singing is permitted. I enjoy singing and not having a particularly good voice, I get a lot of fun out of singing in a crowd where my voice cannot be distinguished from the others. However, some people sing in theatres at the wrong time and thereby spoil the fun for others.”<sup>100</sup>

All of the interviewees indicated that community singing was fun, and several mentioned the central role played in all of it by comedy. For these patrons, community singing provided light entertainment above all else. But another important theme emerges from these answers: the community-building power of group singing. Community singing, as an innate “maker of fraternity” among theater patrons, affected participants in several different ways. Some of the answers indicated that singing improved the general mood, while others revealed that singing in a community allowed the amateur to enjoy music-making without embarrassment. This in turn built up excitement in the theater and allowed patrons to engage directly with the entertainment. One woman observed that community singing made her feel at home in the theater, as if the other patrons were friends instead of strangers. Yet another idea represented in the interviews was that singing in a theater was analogous to singing in a church. In the eyes of some theatergoers, these two institutions had much in

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<sup>100</sup> W.S. Russell, “Singing Popular with Audiences,” 61.

common. Just as the church provided community and like-minded companionship, the picture palace—and its community sing—brought people together and created a bond between them.

## CHAPTER 4

# COMMUNITY SINGING AND THE “CLASS HOUSE”

**D**URING THE 1920S AND '30S, community singing was enormously popular in movie theaters across the country. As already noted, community singing was led by the organist during his “organ solo.” The organ solo was a ten-minute period in the picture-palace program over which the organist had control, and it could feature a wide variety of entertainment styles. In certain theaters, the organ solo was dedicated to community singing. But which theaters were these? The popularity of community singing was not limited by geography: community singing was practiced with great enthusiasm in every major city. Nor was it limited by the size of a theater: community singing was equally successful in tiny neighborhood houses and cavernous, 5,000-seat showpieces. Nor did its popularity depend on a theater’s age, or expense, or scale of luxury. No one exhibition chain was more likely to program community singing than another. Indeed, two houses located only blocks from one another might appear to be identical in all respects but one: the presence or absence of community singing.

The difference had to do with class-based cultural aspirations. Community singing was not an appropriate activity for picture palaces that presented “high-class” entertainment.<sup>1</sup> The exhibitors who programmed entertainment for “class houses” (a trade

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<sup>1</sup> For a sample discussion of what was considered appropriate for a “high-class” house, see: “Paramount (New York),” *Variety*, June 27, 1929, 28.



term) were not concerned about the performance of popular music per se. Organists and stage performers presented popular song in even the most elite theaters. What these exhibitors objected to was audience participation. When patrons joined the organist in song, they could be viewed as disrupting the atmosphere of cultured consumption that was the hallmark of a class house in three ways. First, by collaborating with the organist they upset the audience/performer dichotomy that characterized artistic performance. Second, singing patrons behaved physically in a manner unbecoming for the consumer of art. Finally, they produced a sound that was itself inartistic, and their participation eliminated the possibility for musical edification.

The identity of a class house was determined partly by geographic location and partly by exhibitor decree. Motion-picture exhibitors in the 1920s built massive empires consisting of production companies, distribution exchanges, and theater chains. Every large chain boasted a variety of theaters. In this way, the exhibitor could appeal to all of the potential customers in a city. The picture-palace industry as a whole catered to middle-class patrons, but this does not mean that all patrons had the same taste in entertainment. In order to maximize profit, each of the theaters in an exhibition chain offered a specific style of entertainment and attracted a unique patronage. The class house, which offered artistic entertainment in a dignified atmosphere, was usually located in the heart of the city. These class houses were often flagship theaters: those in each city which hosted film premieres, inaugurated stage shows, and represented the best of what a chain had to offer. However, almost any theater had the potential to develop and cater to a “class” patronage.

In this chapter I present case studies of two important picture palaces, one of which featured community singing and one of which did not: the Brooklyn Paramount and the New York Paramount (located in Times Square). Both of these theaters were located in New York City, a major metropolitan center rich in community-singing activity. Both belonged to the Paramount chain: they exhibited the same films

and shared the same access to stage presentations, organists, and other performers. Both were large and first-rate in terms of adornments and service. Both engaged famous organists with national reputations. However, each theater built a different public image by providing live entertainment suitable to its own specific class of patron.

## Trade-Press Debates about Community Singing

The class connotations of community singing did not go unnoticed by trade professionals. In fact, the late 1920s saw heated discussion on the topic of community singing in the organ solo. This exchange took place in the trade periodical *Exhibitors Herald*. The *Herald*—a weekly publication dedicated to all aspects of motion-picture exhibition—was uniquely positioned to offer a forum for ideas on the topic of live picture-palace entertainment. When exhibitors and other trade commentators wished to voice their opinions about the motion-picture industry, they turned to the *Herald*.

In 1926 and 1927, the *Exhibitors Herald* led an attack against community singing. Although the trade journal’s own writers produced the bulk of the criticism, several notable theater organists contributed as well. The attack had three focal points: the organ, the organist, and the patrons. In each case, contributors attempted to demonstrate that community singing was harmful to, or did not fulfill the potential of, one of these three elements of picture-palace entertainment. It is important to note that although the *Herald* seldom invoked the issue of class by name, class was always at the center of the controversy. The first writer to openly oppose community singing was William R. Weaver, an *Exhibitors Herald* critic who penned a regular column on stage presentation in the picture palace. In two short articles published in the summer of 1926, Weaver introduced all three of the focal points that would characterize the journal’s criticism of community singing in the coming year. His initial article, titled

“Why Not Play the Organs?,” highlighted the first objection made by critics of community singing: the organ, a “great instrument” installed at enormous expense, was wasted on community singing.<sup>2</sup> In his follow-up a month later, Weaver emphasized the “prestige effect” of the organ, an attribute which was permanently undermined by audience participation.<sup>3</sup> Weaver viewed the organ as a high-class instrument that should be reserved for dignified entertainment. He was not alone in this opinion. Organist Albert F. Brown, who boasted a reputation for artistic organ presentations but also led community singing, argued that every organist must fulfill the potential for prestige inherent in his instrument.<sup>4</sup> An anonymous *Herald* commentator took an even harsher view of the situation: “The organist who uses [the organ] to accompany the usually tuneless mouthings of the weaker-willed part of an audience is robbing it of its value.”<sup>5</sup>

Weaver also used the figure of the organist to illustrate the negative effects of community singing. In both of his 1926 articles, Weaver argued that community singing did not permit capable organists to fulfill their potential. He hoped that the value of these “artists” would be acknowledged once the singing craze had passed. He also predicted that the “near-comics getting away with the current murder” would disappear into ignominy as soon as community singing faded in popularity, at which point they could no longer use it to mask their incompetence.<sup>6</sup> A year later, the *Herald* suggested that the use of community singing could destroy the reputation of a “name” organist and reduce his value as a box office draw. The journal encouraged all organists to avoid community singing unless exhibitors demanded it and to

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2 William R. Weaver, “Why Not Play the Organs?,” *Exhibitors Herald*, July 24, 1926, 42.

3 Weaver, “The Last Word About ‘Community Singing’,” *Exhibitors Herald*, August 21, 1926, 45.

4 Albert F. Brown, “Field Open to Organist With Ideas,” *Exhibitors Herald*, January 29, 1927, 33.

5 “Special Holiday Shows Dominant,” *Exhibitors Herald*, December 25, 1926, 82. For a commentary which does not attack the practice of community singing but does request that it be divorced from the organ, see: “Chicago Oriental,” *Exhibitors Herald*, September 25, 1926, 53.

6 Weaver, “The Last Word About ‘Community Singing’,” 45.

return to the “classical solo number” that had represented the high point in organ entertainment.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, Weaver addressed the issue of audience response, but on this point he suffered from inconsistency. In the first article, Weaver had suggested to managers a simple test, which would reveal that audiences almost always preferred a straight, classical solo over community singing.<sup>8</sup> In his follow-up, however, Weaver blamed audiences for the fact that the community-singing scourge could not be easily eliminated. “It is unlikely,” he concluded, “the that public will consent to accept [organists] as anything save the clowns they now insist on being. The public’s that way.”<sup>9</sup> This inconsistency exposed the central problem with the attack on community singing: most audiences actually enjoyed singing. Organist Eddie Meikel was the most prominent advocate of community singing on these grounds. Later in 1926 Meikel admitted that he himself had reservations about the practice, but that the audience always had the final say in entertainment. So far as Meikel himself had observed, the audience wanted community singing.<sup>10</sup>

Other critics joined Weaver in the attack on community singing but provided a more nuanced analysis of the audience. The primary argument of these contributors was that theater patrons paid to be entertained, not to entertain. When patrons participated in community singing they were entertaining themselves, each other, and even the hired performers who worked in the theater. One commentator suggested that patrons would soon be expected to bring instruments and accompany themselves.<sup>11</sup> This was counter to the natural order of entertainment, in which professional artists presented their art and paying visitors sat in passive silence. While these critics regu-

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7 “Theatre Men Weigh Organ Solo Values,” *Exhibitors Herald*, April 23, 1927, 43.

8 Weaver, “Why Not Play the Organs?,” 42, 46.

9 Weaver, “The Last Word About ‘Community Singing,’” 45.

10 “Well, Organists, What About It?,” *Exhibitors Herald*, October 19, 1926, 54.

11 “Chicago Oriental,” *Exhibitors Herald*, July 24, 1926, 43.

larly claimed that patrons themselves were unhappy when asked to participate in the entertainment, there is no evidence that this was the case.<sup>12</sup>

## The Brooklyn Paramount

At the height of the picture-palace era, Brooklyn was a hotbed of community singing activity. A number of large palaces in downtown Brooklyn—most notably the Fox and the Paramount—competed for the singing patrons. The Paramount never had an organist who stayed for more than a few months. Major exhibitors, such as Paramount-Publix, often shuttled organists between theaters in order to provide variety for the patrons. Despite the changes in leadership, community singing was practiced at the Paramount for many years and it remained a cornerstone of that theater's entertainment style well into the sound era.

The character, appeal, and status of the Brooklyn Paramount were grounded in the reputation of the surrounding neighborhood. Brooklyn itself carried important connotations for a 1920s exhibitor, such that the character of the borough determined the class of the theaters which it contained. In the late nineteenth century, Brooklyn had expanded rapidly due to the development of trolley lines and the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge. The growing city had been formally annexed in 1898 and had become a borough of New York. Completion of the Williamsburg Bridge and the expansion of the New York subway system in the early twentieth century had made Brooklyn even more accessible, all of which contributed both to casual tourism and to immigration.<sup>13</sup> Most of the newcomers were Eastern, Central, and Southern Europeans, and many were Jewish.<sup>14</sup> Public transportation had also allowed Brooklyn

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12 “‘Organ Club’ Community Song Fest with Frills,” *Exhibitors Herald*, August 28, 1926, 53.

13 Ron Miller, Rita Seiden Miller, and Stephen Karp, “The Fourth Largest City in America—A Sociological History of Brooklyn,” in *Brooklyn USA*, edited by Rita Seiden Miller (New York: Brooklyn College Press, 1979), 23-5.

14 Miller et al., “A Sociological History of Brooklyn,” 27.

to develop an amusement destination of mythological proportions: Coney Island. It might be said that the amusement parks of Coney Island anticipated the picture palaces that would arise a decade later, since they sought to attract a diverse, middle-class patronage with a mixture of fantasy and education, all for a low entrance fee. The early-twentieth-century parks also cleaned up Coney Island’s seedy reputation in the same way that picture palaces transformed moviegoing after the era of the nickelodeon.<sup>15</sup> Although Brooklyn’s major picture palaces were located downtown, not at Coney Island, they nonetheless reflected the same spirit of carefree escape and attracted the same crowd of patrons: middle-class adventure seekers from Brooklyn and Manhattan who were looking for a night of fun.

It was the Paramount that introduced community singing to Brooklyn. Exhibitors at the Paramount realized that community singing—which had been popular in other regions for years—was a perfect match for the class of patron that Brooklyn attracted and they expected that patrons would embrace the practice with enthusiasm. The exhibitors were not disappointed. Following the opening of the Paramount community singing exploded in the area, and reviews of organ solos indicated that the popularity of the practice in Brooklyn matched even its popularity in Chicago, the city where picture-palace community singing had first been established.<sup>16</sup>

The 4,084-seat Paramount was designed by the architectural firm of Rapp & Rapp, and it was located, like many urban theaters, in an ordinary-looking office block

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15 Ellen M. Snyder-Grenier, *Brooklyn!: An Illustrated History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 185-92.

16 Downtown Brooklyn boasted four picture palaces, each within a few blocks of the others. The oldest was the Strand, erected as a vaudeville theater in 1918 and, in the 1920s, operated as a picture palace in the regional Cocalis-Stamatis circuit. The Strand was the smallest theater of the four, with 2,870 seats. On January 25, 1925, the Albee opened just a few blocks to the northwest, also as a vaudeville house. This 3,250-seat theater later exhibited films as part of the RKO circuit. Brooklyn entered the golden age of picture palace entertainment with the Fox theater, which opened on August 21, 1928, next to the Strand. This magnificent 4,305-seat palace would be the Paramount’s main competition in the years to come. The Fox soon became notorious, like the Paramount, for raucous community singing led by a string of famous organists. The Paramount, slightly smaller at 4,084 seats, opened up on the street next to the RKO Albee only a few months after the Fox (*Cinema Treasures*, <http://cinematreasures.org> (accessed on September 29, 2012)).

(Figure 4.1). The Paramount presented the entering visitor with progressive visions of splendor. She would enter the dour façade (Figure 4.2) and pass through the comparatively modest lobby (Figure 4.3) and restrained lounge (Figure 4.4), only to then find herself in the theater's dazzling auditorium (Figure 4.5), which the Theatre Historical Society of America today considers to be "easily the most flamboyant of all Rapp & Rapp designs."<sup>17</sup> The chief designer behind the Paramount, Arthur Frederick Adams, regarded the theater a "a composite palace": a theater which combined the elements of "atmospheric" and traditional design. Atmospheric theaters were popularized in the mid-1920s by the architect John Eberson. These theaters were designed to resemble exotic outdoor courtyards. To create the illusion, Eberson studded his dark-blue ceilings with electric-light stars and projected moving clouds from a hidden Brenograph machine.<sup>18</sup> Plaster masonry, real trees, fountains, and stuffed birds completed the effect.<sup>19</sup> The atmospheric touches in the Paramount were applied to the auditorium, which featured potted plants, a latticework trellis suspended above the balcony (Figure 4.6), and side bays of sky blue (Figure 4.7).<sup>20</sup> The atmosphere that Rapp & Rapp tried to evoke was one of refined natural beauty. As the Theatre Historical Society puts it, "The audience felt like they were in a great garden pavilion, surrounded by fountains, flowers, vines, and songbirds."<sup>21</sup> In many other aspects, however, the auditorium resembled those in other Rapp & Rapp palaces. The space was divided into orchestra seating and balcony, with a mezzanine tucked between the two.

An extraordinary parade of organists passed through the Brooklyn Paramount, each of whom was at the top of his or her field. Each organist who graced the

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17 "Brooklyn Paramount Theatre," *Marquee*, 30.3 (Third Quarter 1998): 10.

18 The Brenograph, a powerful projection device, was employed in picture-palace exhibition during the 1920s and '30s. It is described in Chapter 3.

19 David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1981), 68-9.

20 Naylor, *American Picture Palace*, 136-8.

21 The Theatre Historical Society and the Theatre Museum, *Brooklyn Sees Stars: Theatre and Theatres Across the Great Bridge* (Annual No. 37, 2010), 21.

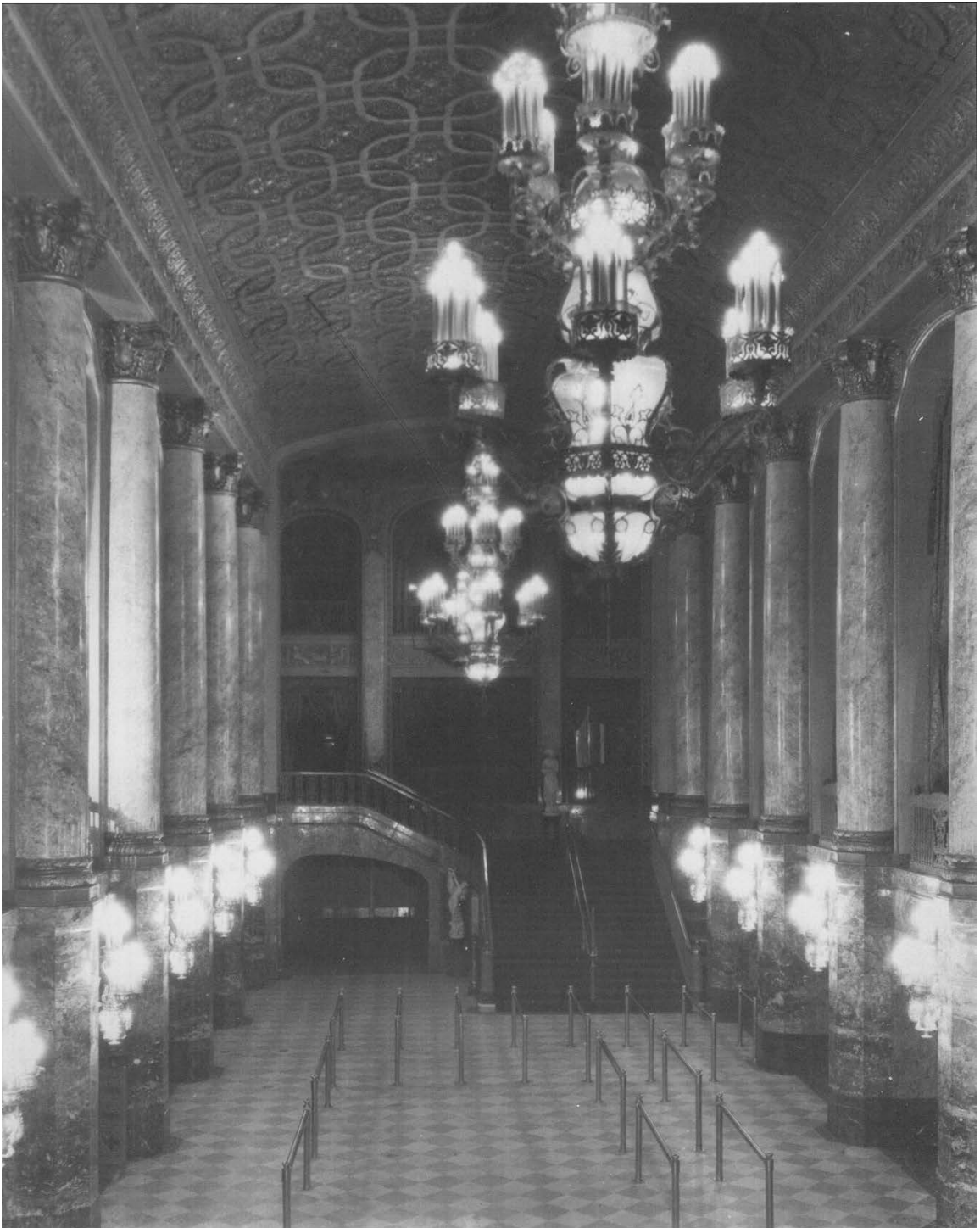


**Figure 4.1:** The proprietors of the Brooklyn Paramount spared no effort to attract attention to the theater. Courtesy Terry Helgesen Collection, Theatre Historical Society.



**Figure 4.2:** The Brooklyn Paramount's marquee. Courtesy Terry Helgesen Collection, Theatre Historical Society.

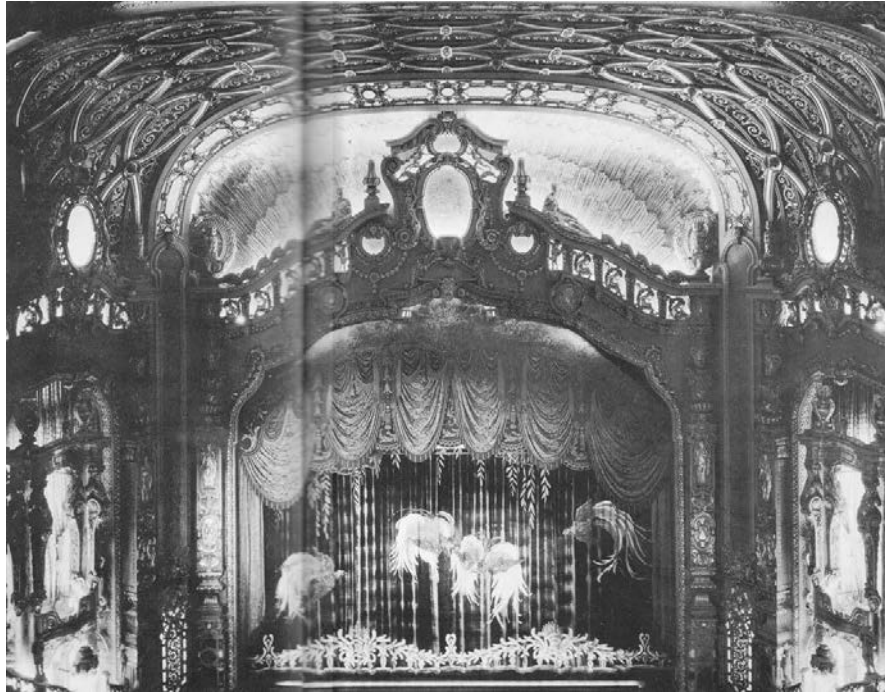




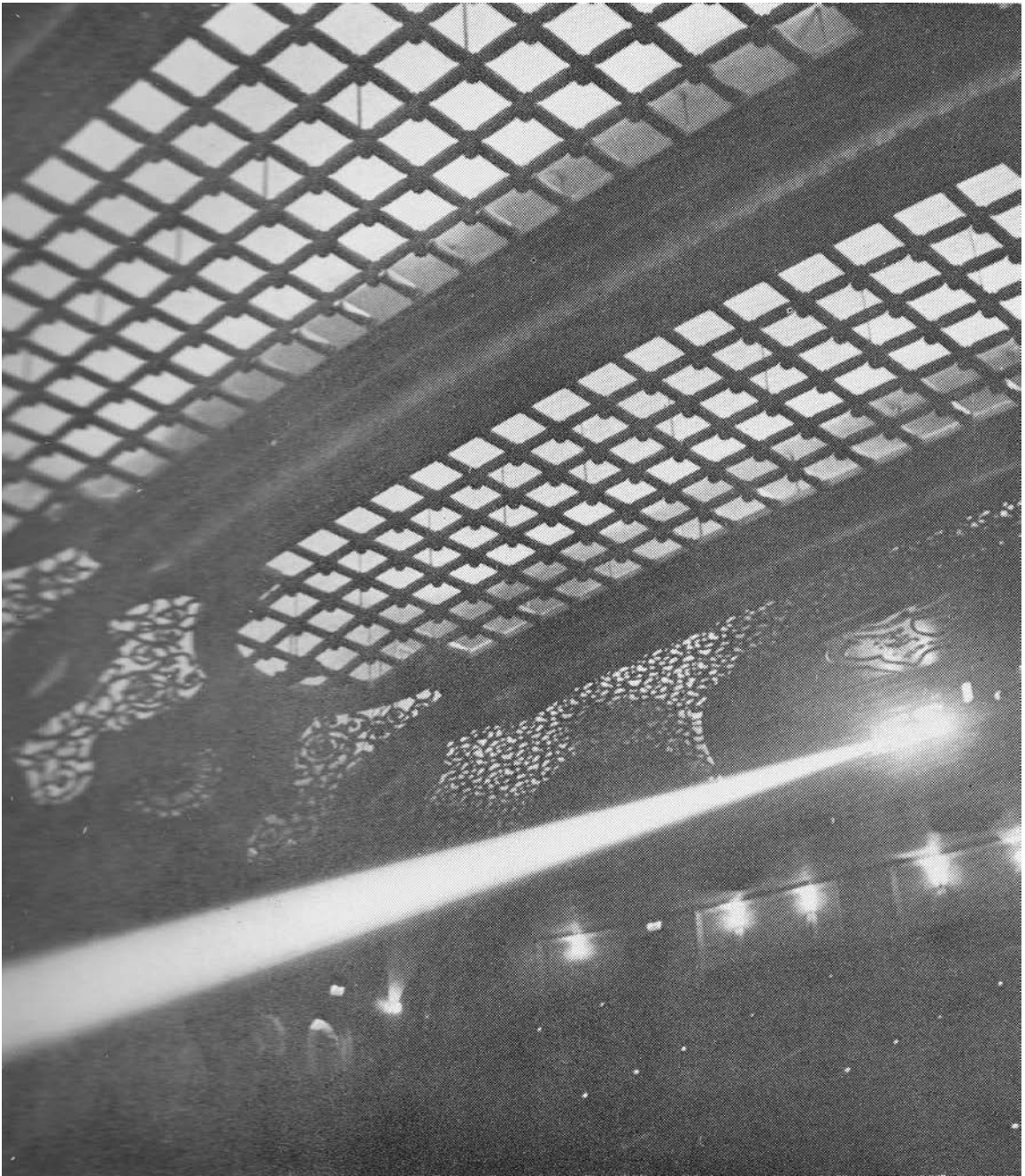
**Figure 4.3:** The lobby of the Brooklyn Paramount. Courtesy Terry Helgesen Collection, Theatre Historical Society.



**Figure 4.4:** The main lounge, in which visitors waited for the next show to begin. Courtesy Terry Helgesen Collection, Theatre Historical Society.



**Figure 4.5:** The proscenium and curtain. Rapp & Rapp incorporated atmospheric elements into the Brooklyn Paramount, including the sunburst effect over the proscenium and the vines trailing down the curtain. Courtesy Theatre Historical Society.



**Figure 4.6:** The latticed ceiling over the balcony created the illusion that one was sitting in an outdoor garden. Courtesy Theatre Historical Society.



**Figure 4.7:** The alcoves were painted sky blue, to create the illusion of an outdoor theater, and vines hung from the ceiling. At the same time, the statues, busts, and plaster ornaments echoed the European models that informed traditional picture-palace design. Courtesy Terry Helgesen Collection, Theatre Historical Society.

Paramount's console (Table 4.1) displayed unique and distinguishing characteristics, and each boasted a diverse resume of picture-palace experience. However, each of the organists suited his or her style to the Brooklyn Paramount and sought to entertain the patrons in the manner to which they had become accustomed.

**Table 4.1:** Organists at the Brooklyn Paramount

Organist	Years as Soloist
Henry Murtagh	1928–29
Bob West	1929–30
Earl Abel	1930
Stuart Barrie	1930–31
Elsie Thompson	1931 <sup>*</sup>
Merle Clark	1931–32
Dick Leibert	1932– <sup>**</sup>

<sup>\*</sup> Elsie Thompson appeared in conjunction with other organists both before and after her tenure as a soloist. As early as 1929, she joined Bob West at the console. Her last recorded appearance was in 1932, alongside Dick Leibert.

<sup>\*\*</sup> The trade journals ceased to review live entertainment at the Brooklyn Paramount while Dick Leibert was at the console.

### *Stuart Barrie and the Brooklyn Style*

Consider, for instance, the career of Stuart Barrie, who took over the Paramount console in October 1930. Barrie had been conducting community sings for many years. His first appointment of national significance had been at the Grand Central theater in St. Louis. There, at least as early as the first half of 1925, Barrie had led community singing on a regular basis, and he was credited with starting the St. Louis vogue for community singing.<sup>22</sup> In 1926, he moved downtown to open St. Louis's Ambassador theater. The 3,005-seat Ambassador was a new palace, built that year by the Rapp & Rapp firm of architects. Barrie, however, did not offer community singing during his year at the Ambassador, and his solos tended more towards the serious or high-minded than the comedic. A typical concept for a solo—one used by organists all

<sup>22</sup> "Zez Confrey's Jazz Orchestra Tops Bill," *Exhibitors Herald*, February 27, 1926, 59.

over the country and by Barrie at the Ambassador—was that all modern jazz hits were based on pieces of classical music. To prove this to the audience, Barrie performed pairs of numbers so as to illustrate the elements that they had in common.<sup>23</sup> Such a presentation favored art music as the only form of original musical expression, while it dismissed popular music as derivative and second-rate. Solos of this sort were designed for patrons who took pleasure in learning and valued art above popular culture (or, perhaps, for patrons who desired to be perceived in this way).<sup>24</sup> In short, at the Ambassador Barrie targeted an audience with cultured tastes.

Barrie expanded his highbrow programming for Ambassador patrons by initiating a series of Sunday afternoon organ recitals, the first of their kind in St. Louis. The Sunday afternoon organ recital—a popular feature in urban American theaters—always featured classical and semi-classical works. It attracted a cultured patronage who enjoyed art music and did not want to be distracted by community singing or other live acts. The organ recital was the most highbrow variation of picture-palace entertainment and always exceeded the culture standard set by the regular program. At the Ambassador Barrie added an educational element when he gave a short talk before each number. In these talks he described each piece to facilitate its appreciation and gave “an anecdote about its composition.”<sup>25</sup> At his first recital, which featured works by Chopin, Kreisler, and Rubinstein, Barrie was joined by violinist Joseph Winters, concertmaster of the Ambassador orchestra. The recital was reviewed with great enthusiasm.<sup>26</sup>

For his first appearance at the Brooklyn Paramount in 1930, Barrie changed his performance style once again. He did this because it was the duty of the organist to

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23 Ruebel, “Ambassador (St. Louis),” *Variety*, October 20, 1926, 69.

24 *Ibid.*, 69.

25 “Stuart Barrie, Organ Concert,” *Variety*, November 10, 1926, 16.

26 “With an organist like Barrie and a four-manual instrument like the Ambassador’s, these concerts are destined to have capacity audiences. The first one was great!” (*Ibid.*, 16.)



adapt to the preferences of each new audience. Barrie opened his inaugural solo with three popular numbers, which he played “in every conceivable manner.”<sup>27</sup> Following his solo, Barrie offered a program of community singing in the form of a contest to satisfy the patrons’ expectations and establish himself as a song leader. Barrie received the highest praise for this portion of his solo. According to the *Exhibitors Herald* reviewer, “The audience join[ed] in the singing as if Barrie had always been at the organ.”<sup>28</sup> Barrie, however, did not excise a higher-toned artistry from his solo completely. After the second of three singing numbers, “Springtime in the Rockies,” Barrie offered a number of instrumental variations on the tune that showed off his skill at the console. Like most of the Paramount’s organists, Barrie marked his arrival at the theater with a combination of low- and high-class elements. In subsequent appearances he would employ solo performance only as an introduction or for comedic effect.<sup>29</sup>

But not every organist transformed his performance style to this degree. Some, either through chance or conscious decision, worked in a series of theaters that all catered to similar audiences. Others forced their preferred style of entertainment onto unwilling audiences. Sometimes these headstrong console artists succeeded in cultivating a preference for their presentations—and sometimes they did not.

### *Henry Murtagh and Opening Night*

Henry Murtagh, the first organist to perform at the Brooklyn Paramount, numbers among the successful. Murtagh built his career around community singing, and he introduced the practice to reluctant audiences with excellent results. He was a natural choice for the Paramount and was no doubt hired because of his fame as a song leader.

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27 “Organ Solos: Stuart Barrie,” *Exhibitors Herald World*, October 25, 1930, 62.

28 *Ibid.*, 62.

29 “Organ Solos: Stuart Barrie and Elsie Thompson,” *Exhibitors Herald World*, November 22, 1930, 58.

Murtagh made his name with community singing at the New York Rivoli, where he began to perform in August 1926.<sup>30</sup> Located in downtown Manhattan, the 2,270-seat Rivoli had been standing for nearly ten years and was no longer a fashionable picture palace. The New York Paramount was to open just a few months later, one in a string of increasingly large and lavish exhibition houses erected in downtown Manhattan. The Rivoli was owned by exhibition magnate S.L. “Roxy” Rothapfel, who had opened his magnificent 5,920-seat Roxy theater early in the following year. The Rivoli, a flagship presentation venue for Rothapfel in 1917, was by 1926 a small and outdated palace that could not hope to attract the class crowds.<sup>31</sup> About two thirds of Murtagh’s organ solos were community sings. When the patrons weren’t invited to join in, he played popular songs without slides, played comic variations on a song, provided verbal humor, and at least once illustrated a serious song with images projected from slides onto the scrim curtain.

While at the Rivoli, Murtagh demonstrated that an organist is not always wise to maintain the status quo. Murtagh’s predecessor at the Rivoli, Harold Ramsey, had attempted to introduce community singing but had met with little success.<sup>32</sup> Murtagh,

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30 Rush, “Rivoli (New York),” *Variety*, August 25, 1926, 24. Murtagh was trained at the Hope-Jones Unit Orchestra school in New York (one of many theater organ schools to turn a profit on the high demand for qualified organists) and worked at the Vitagraph theater in New York City before moving to the Liberty theater in Seattle in October 1914. In 1920, while working in Oregon, Murtagh won a contest to write the music for a state song, “Oregon, My Oregon.” He was regarded as a “West coast organist” for the first portion of his career.

31 Ben M. Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the Golden Age of the Movie Palace* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1961), 53.

32 In January 1926, Ramsay convinced the Rivoli audience to sing a chorus of “Sleepy Time Gal” (“Rivoli,” *Variety*, January 20, 1926, 36). The patrons had previously refused to sing with Ramsay (“Rivoli,” *Variety*, January 13, 1926, 41), although they had been responding positively to *Song Car-Tune* shorts, possibly exhibited in conjunction with the organ, for several months (“Rivoli,” *Variety*, November 11, 1925, 26). Ramsay’s next recorded attempt, however, was hardly a success. A *Variety* reviewer notes that Ramsay inspired only “a small choir of voices which represented about 1 per cent of the audience” to join him in singing some old numbers (“Rivoli,” *Variety*, February 17, 1926, 43). Ramsay appears not to have attempted community singing—at the Rivoli or any other house—again. With this information, it is safe to conclude that community singing initially failed at the Rivoli for two reasons: the practice was new to the theater and Ramsay was incompetent at leading the sings. Murtagh demonstrated that the Rivoli patrons were happy to participate in well-led community singing.



however, saw that community singing could be successful if properly administered, and for his first solo at the Rivoli Murtagh pulled out all the stops to make his audience enjoy themselves.<sup>33</sup> Murtagh would continue to introduce community singing to audiences and encourage their appreciation of the activity for the rest of his career. Before initiating the community-singing craze in Brooklyn, however, Murtagh took a detour through Chicago, where he performed in quite a different style of theater.

When organist Jesse Crawford came to New York to assume the prestigious position at the New York Paramount, Henry Murtagh took over Crawford's previous post—also very prestigious—at the Chicago theater in Chicago. Murtagh conducted community singing at the Chicago,<sup>34</sup> but the atmosphere in which it took place was wholly different from that at the Rivoli. The Chicago was the flagship theater for Balaban & Katz and was therefore committed to high-class entertainment. The trade press condemned Murtagh's impudence and lambasted the practice of community singing. The *Herald* reviewer, for example, described Murtagh's sings as "happily infrequent,"<sup>35</sup> wisely avoided,<sup>36</sup> not to be overdone,<sup>37</sup> and undesired by the audience, who preferred sober and highly musical efforts.<sup>38</sup> When Murtagh avoided community singing, on the other hand, he "gave the folks an idea of what a real organist can do with a real organ," an underhanded compliment which simultaneously denigrated the alternative

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33 "Rivoli (New York)," *Variety*, August 25, 1926, 24. To open the solo, Murtagh informed the audience via slide that his doctor had claimed he was going deaf, and that he wanted to use their singing to test his hearing. After they failed to respond well to his first number, Murtagh mourned the horrible truth of the diagnosis before switching to a better-known song. To this the audience responded energetically, at which point Murtagh switched back to the first song. The amused patrons took a much better try the second time around. At the conclusion, all were in good humor and Murtagh had demolished any resistance to singing.

34 Crawford might at some point have led community singing at the Chicago, but trade-press reviews reveal that he certainly did not incorporate community singing into his solos for the year prior to Murtagh's arrival. Therefore, we can consider Murtagh to have "introduced" community singing to the Chicago audience.

35 "Organ Solos: Henry B. Murtagh," *Exhibitors Herald*, May 14, 1927, 44.

36 "Organ Solos: Henry B. Murtagh," *Exhibitors Herald*, September 17, 1927, 42.

37 "Organ Solos: Henry B. Murtagh," *Exhibitors Herald*, April 30, 1927, 49.

38 "Organ Solos: Henry B. Murtagh," *Exhibitors Herald*, May 21, 1927, 40.

practice.<sup>39</sup> In short, there was disagreement over whether the Chicago theater was an appropriate venue for community singing. The trade commentators found that it was certainly not. Murtagh waffled.<sup>40</sup> And in the end, the patrons developed a taste for occasional community singing, as long as it was well-presented.<sup>41</sup>

For his first appearance at the Brooklyn Paramount, Murtagh offered an atypical presentation. Opening night was a grand occasion for any picture palace, accompanied by lights, crowds, special guests, and all the pomp that could be mustered. The program assembled for opening night contained special performances, a dazzling stage show, and an exceptional feature film (the star of which might even be in attendance). The organist also took special care to present a solo that was both highly entertaining and appropriately dignified. The opening-night program was then repeated throughout the first week so that a large number of patrons could share in the experience.

The entire inaugural program was special, but in some ways its organ-solo portion required even more careful attention than the other elements. The organ ranked among an exhibitor’s largest investments, and in the era of sound films (the Brooklyn Paramount was wired for sound from the start and never relied upon live musical accompaniment for films), the organ was expected to draw patrons as a major attraction in its own right. For these reasons, the organist had to impress the audience with the entertainment value of the organ from the very first performance. The theater owners didn’t want their investment to go to waste, and the organist didn’t want to lose his job—an inevitable result if he failed to entertain the patrons.

For the opening of the Brooklyn Paramount on November 24, 1928, therefore, Henry B. Murtagh presented “A Trip Through the Organ,” a solo popular with organists across the nation. The “Trip Through the Organ” idea was often used for

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39 “Organ Solos: Henry B. Murtagh,” *Exhibitors Herald*, May 21, 1927, 40.

40 “Organ Solos: Henry B. Murtagh,” *Exhibitors Herald*, March 26, 1927, 35.

41 Loop, “Chicago (Chicago),” *Variety*, April 13, 1927, 25.

house openings because it showcased the complete range of the instrument and helped patrons to develop a taste for organ music. In his solo, Murtagh introduced the audience to all of the timbres and effects that the new Wurlitzer 4/26 was capable of producing. He demonstrated “the violin, piano, tuba, tambourine and castanets, xylophone, mandolin, saxophone, banjo, a whole German band, vox humana, darkey quartette, then followed by birds, dogs barking, storm, harp, flute, chimes, trains, auto horns, marimba, Scotch bagpipes, calliope, cat fight, hand organ (without monkey), bugle and many others.” Finally, Murtagh incorporated all of these sounds into “a classical number” which exploited the entire range of the instrument in pitch and volume and evoked a thunder of applause.<sup>42</sup>

Patrons at the Paramount would not have expected this opening night solo to set a precedent for organ entertainment at the theater. The “Trip Through the Organ” solo set a high-class tone for the first week but did not commit the Paramount to high-class entertainment in the long run. This was true for two reasons. First, this number was a perfect house opener, but it could only be exploited on that special occasion. Its novelty faded after a single performance. Second, it was natural for the Paramount, or any picture palace, to program high-class entertainment for the opening show regardless of the theater’s character. A theater opening was a dignified occasion, and “A Trip Through the Organ” was more appropriate than community singing because the solo—notwithstanding its barking dog and banjo impressions—lent an air of gravity to the proceedings. The performance of a grand classical number for which the audience sat in silence outclassed any of the solos that were to follow. Based on the reputation of the neighborhood, patrons would have expected a spate of raucous community singing in the weeks to come. This was their one opportunity not to participate in the creation of the entertainment but to appreciate the power of the organ and the artistry of Murtagh.

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42 “Organ Solos: Henry Murtagh,” *Exhibitors Herald and Motion Picture World*, December 1, 1928, 53.

### *Bob West and the Public Address System*

To get a sense of how community singing worked at the Paramount, we will turn to another organist and another “opening night.” In May 1929, Murtagh was replaced by Bob West. The introduction of a new organist was always a major event for the Paramount. Each Paramount organist was highly visible to the public and was promoted on the basis of his individual character and unique presentations. Often, an organist would accrue a devoted following; patrons would attend the theater primarily to see and hear their favorite performer. The organist was heavily promoted because the theater relied on him to become a big attraction, but this created a problem for exhibitors: when an organist moved on, they had to convince the audience that a new performer was equally gifted. For this reason, an organist’s opening week was crucial both to his success and that of the theater. The new organist had to win over the patrons as quickly as possible. To do this, he needed to demonstrate both that he could fill the shoes of his predecessor and that he brought something new and special to the theater.

West was introduced to the Paramount audience as “The Man You’ll Love to Sing With”: a slogan that left no doubt about his anticipated role.<sup>43</sup> As such, West—unlike Murtagh—did not try to impress the audience with highbrow music at his initial appearance. Instead, West demonstrated his capability to carry on existing traditions with a program of community singing entitled “Smile, Grin and Giggle.” In this program he asked the audience to sing “Carolina Moon,” held a laughing contest between the boys and girls, offered special lyrics to the tune of “Smiles,” and concluded with the singing of “Sweetheart of All My Dreams.” The laughing contest in particular indicates the lighthearted tone of the solo. The contest was set to the tune of “That’s My Weakness Now,” the slides for which replaced all words other than the title phrase with “ha-ha.” The special lyrics to “Smiles” may have been humorous

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<sup>43</sup> “Organ Solos: Bob West,” *Exhibitors Herald World*, May 11, 1929, 45.

as well, or they may have concerned West's arrival at the Paramount. From beginning to end, there was nothing serious or "classy" about West's presentation. His goal was simple: to generate excitement and introduce an element of good humor.

West did make a point, though, of exhibiting his skills as an organist. As the console rose out of the pit, he showed off with "a 'hot' tune." Such a flashy entrance not only drew attention to the new organist and stirred excitement among the patrons, but also demonstrated that West was a capable player, even if his primary task was to accompany community singing.<sup>44</sup>

Immediately upon his arrival in early 1929, West permanently transformed the presentation style of organists at the Paramount. After emerging from the pit for his first appearance, West left the bench, stood beside the organ console, and spoke to the audience with the aid of a public address system. This was something new. Paramount patrons had never heard their organist speak before. West's predecessor, Henry Murtagh, had communicated with the audience solely through slides provided in advance to the projectionist and displayed at the appropriate points in his solos. In this way, Murtagh had been able to make jokes and otherwise express his personality indirectly, but he never communicated with his auditors face to face.<sup>45</sup> When West spoke aloud he tore down in an instant the barrier that had existed between audience and organist since the opening of the Paramount, and in so doing he changed the role of the organist permanently. The organist, who formerly provided only music, now offered personality and the chance for intimate connection as well.

The trade press was quick to comment on West's innovation. One reviewer noted, for instance, that West's "pleasing personality and intimate manner of talking to [the audience] won out."<sup>46</sup> This suggests that the patrons may have been initially resistant to a new organist but were enthralled by West's manner of presentation. West had

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>45</sup> "Organ Solos: Henry Murtagh," *Exhibitors Herald World*, January 19, 1929, 48.

<sup>46</sup> "Organ Solos: Bob West," *Exhibitors Herald World*, May 11, 1929, 45.

become an instant friend and confidant, and he had gained the patrons’ trust and affection by opening up to them on a personal level. The result was exuberant singing and a warm reception. West’s decision to speak in May 1929, however, was not made lightly, for it too was linked to the perceived class of the theater. The reviewer did not note the fact that while West’s approach to organist-audience relations may have been uniquely suited to a theater like the Brooklyn Paramount it would have been utterly inappropriate for a class house. West’s relationship with his patrons was that between friends, all making music as near-equals. In a class house the boundary between performer and audience was less permeable, largely because the performer was perceived to produce art, not mere entertainment. The presentation of art in the picture palace required clearly-defined roles: the performer produced art, while the patron consumed it. The use of a public address system, while too familiar for the class theater, was the perfect complement to the practice of community singing. It removed the organist from his pedestal and helped to further a sense of community during the sing.

The *Herald* reviewer was evidently taken with West’s personal manner and his habit of speaking directly to the audience: “Bob’s personality has dominated his audience to the extent that a few spoken words from him starts them all singing.”<sup>47</sup> The image of domination is a powerful one, and perhaps well-suited to describe West’s influence on his patrons. West quickly won the audience’s affection, and they responded instantly to his entreaties. Over the course of West’s tenure, the *Herald* reviewer continued to refer in every single review to West’s practice of speaking, usually with the distinction that West communicated something “orally” instead of by slide. While we might take the element of speech for granted today, in 1929 it was a new idea for organists and a distinctive feature of the Brooklyn Paramount’s entertainment.

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47 “Organ Solos: Bob West,” *Exhibitors Herald World*, June 29, 1929, 158.

Another review—this one from *Variety*—also remarked on the organist’s habit of speaking to the audience: “West turns around and faces his audience to talk and encourage better vocal outbursts. And they love it.”<sup>48</sup> The reviewers are in perfect agreement concerning the motive for and effect of West’s approach to community singing. His speeches broke down the barrier of formality, fostered an intimate atmosphere, and encouraged exuberant participation.

We have seen that community singing had been, in general, much maligned in the trade press. The reviews just cited, however, are entirely positive. In fact, community singing at the Brooklyn Paramount never met with a word of criticism. The Paramount’s first organist, Henry Murtagh, conducted community singing every week after his opening solo, and his sings evoked overwhelmingly positive reviews. One reviewer wrote that he had “created a fine following”<sup>49</sup> with his community sings and had “become a showstopper.”<sup>50</sup> The reviewer, clearly satisfied with community singing as it was practiced at the Paramount, also noted the big hand received by Murtagh at the end of every solo and remarked that it was well-deserved.<sup>51</sup> Not a hint of criticism emerged in a year of published accounts across trade journals. This had not been the case when Murtagh conducted community singing at the Chicago, a dignified flagship theater. And this was also not the case when patrons dared to open their mouths at the upscale New York Paramount, to which we now turn.

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48 Bige, “B’klyn Paramount,” *Variety*, January 15, 1930, 53.

49 “Organ Solos: Henry Murtagh,” *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, December 15, 1928, 50.

50 “Organ Solos: Henry Murtagh,” *Exhibitors Herald World*, January 19, 1929, 48.

51 “Organ Solos: Henry Murtagh,” *Exhibitors Herald World*, February 2, 1929, 53.

## The New York Paramount

The New York Paramount—or as historian Ben Hall put it, the *paramount* Paramount<sup>52</sup>—dwelt at the pinnacle of the picture-palace system. This Paramount opened on November 19, 1926, to much fanfare in the trade and popular press and set a box office record of \$80,000 in its first week. The Paramount was not the largest palace in New York City—the Capitol, also in midtown Manhattan, boasted a staggering 5,230 seats—but it was by far the most glamorous and up-to-date. Like the Brooklyn Paramount, the New York Paramount was a Rapp & Rapp design (Figure 4.8)—the first Rapp & Rapp palace to be erected in New York. It created a sensation with its luxury and decadence. From a modern perspective, the Theatre Historical Society of America succinctly describes the Paramount as “less flamboyant than some other Rapp & Rapp endeavors, but not by very much” (Figure 4.9).<sup>53</sup> The Paramount’s design drew freely from the finest of European art and culture. The lobby was modeled after the Paris opera house, complete with white marble columns and a sweeping double staircase (Figure 4.10). The public spaces were outfitted with thirty-odd bronze statues of all sorts, an even larger collection of marble pieces, and dozens of oil paintings by well-known artists.<sup>54</sup>

The Paramount’s organ was a major showpiece. While not the largest Wurlitzer ever built, it was widely considered to be the finest.<sup>55</sup> Even more talked-about than the organ, however, was the organist. Jesse Crawford, for whom the organ was specifically designed, arrived from Chicago in 1926 to take the post at the Paramount, and he remained there until 1933. He was and is by far the most famous of all theater organists, and much has been written about his life and career. Jesse Crawford’s wife, Helen,

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<sup>52</sup> Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats*, 149.

<sup>53</sup> “New York Paramount: Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Tribute,” *Marquee*, 33.3 (Third Quarter 2001): 26.

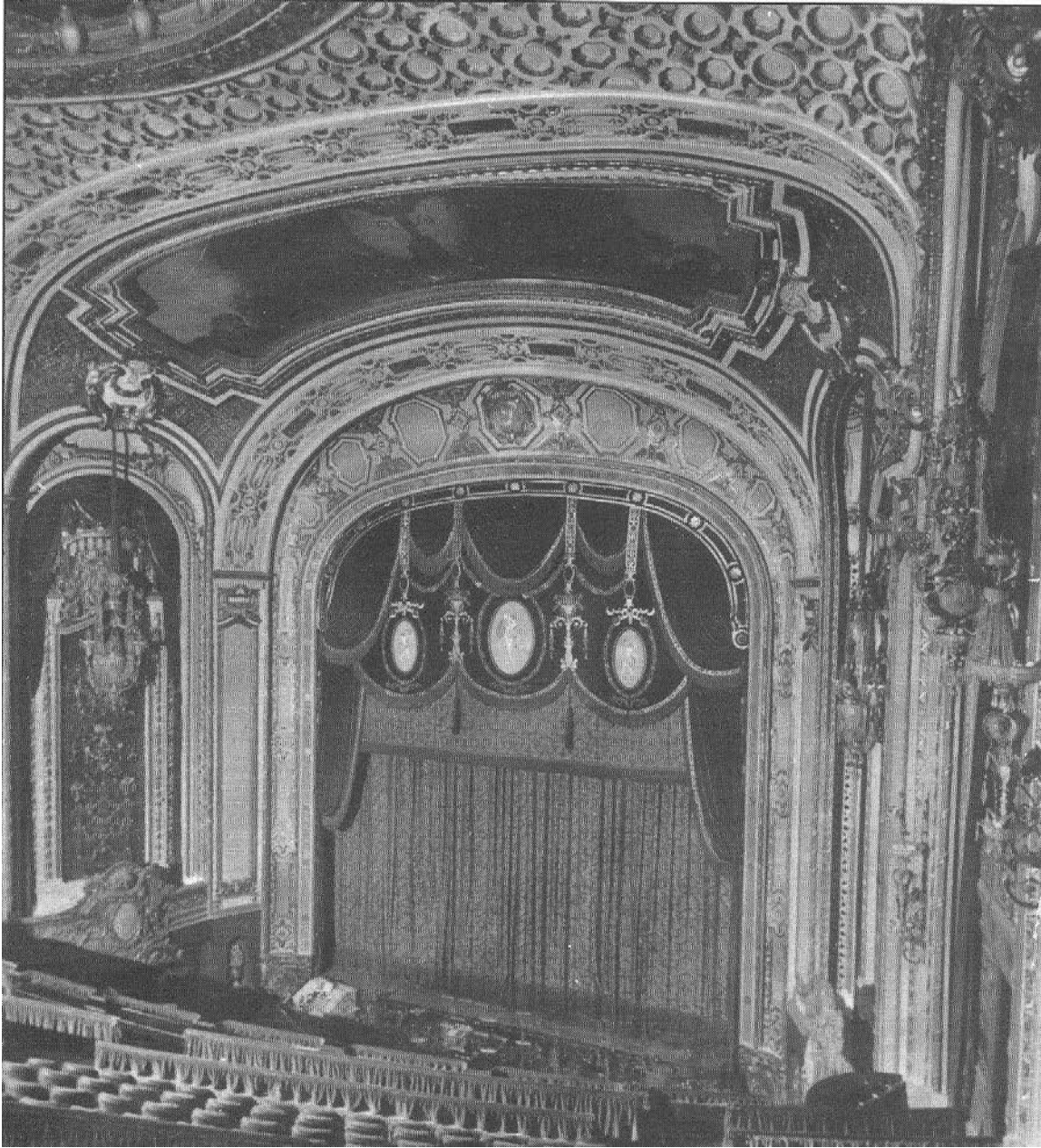
<sup>54</sup> Earl G. Talbott, “Palace of Splendor Disperses Its Riches,” *Marquee*, 22.3 (Third Quarter 1990), 8.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

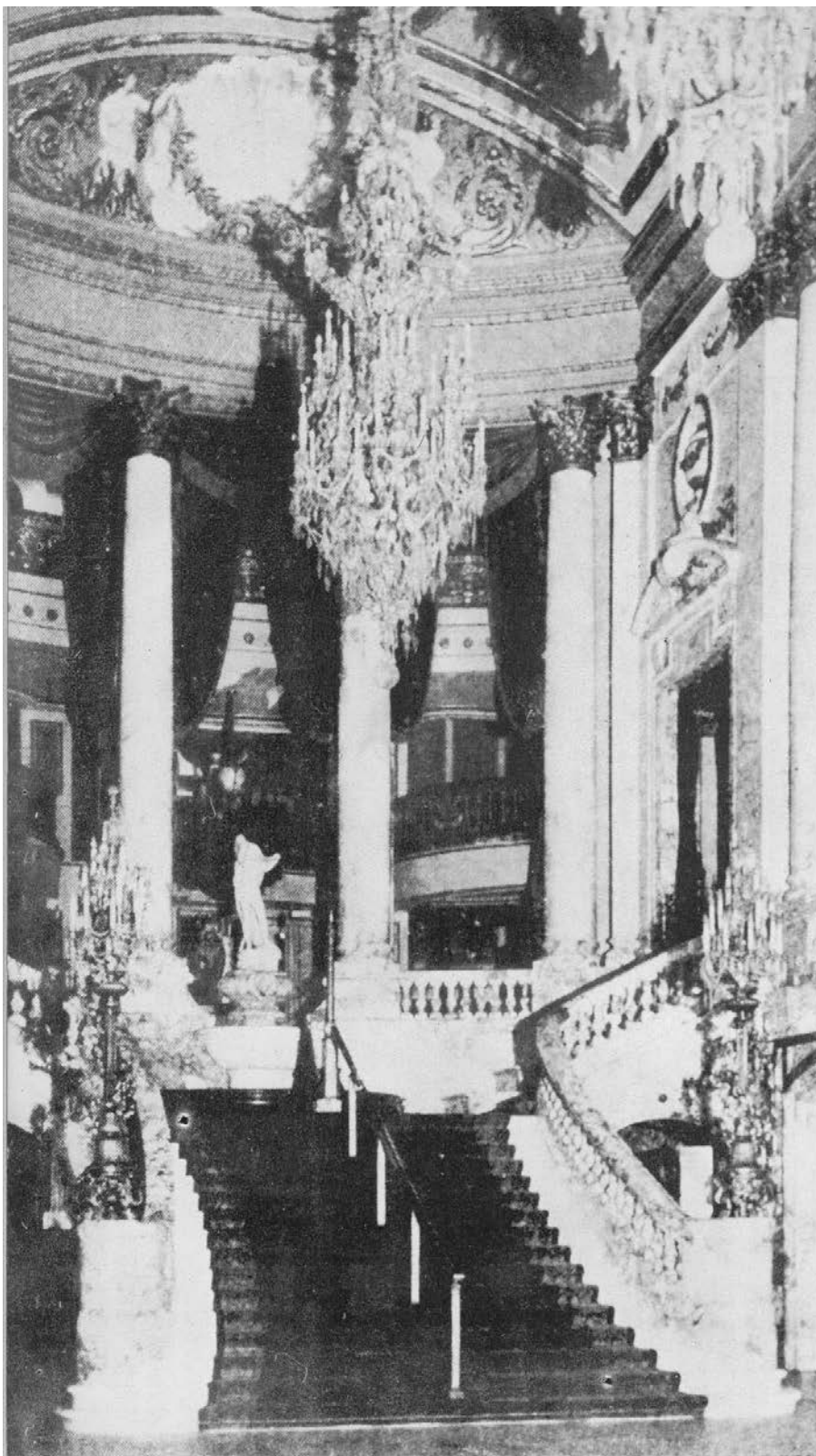




**Figure 4.8:** The Times Square marquee of the New York Paramount. Courtesy Theatre Historical Society.



**Figure 4.9:** The proscenium and stage area in the New York Paramount's auditorium. Courtesy Theatre Historical Society.



**Figure 4.10:** The lobby of the New York Paramount. Courtesy Theatre Historical Society.

was a fine organist in her own right. She often appeared at the Paramount’s twin console, and the two organists specialized in different styles of music: Jesse played popular ballads exquisitely, while Helen had a gift for rhythmic, fast-paced numbers.

The New York Paramount marked the apex of Jesse Crawford’s career, but he had spent many years building his reputation as he advanced through the ranks of theater organists. Crawford worked hard throughout his life to find success. Less than two years after Crawford’s birth in 1895, his father passed away. Crawford’s impoverished mother, unable to care for her child, placed the boy in Our Lady of Lourdes orphanage near Seattle.<sup>56</sup> He taught himself how to play the cornet while at the orphanage and later took to the piano as well. Crawford obtained his first post as organist in 1911 at a small theater in Spokane. In 1913 he moved to Billings and shortly thereafter to Seattle, where he played in a number of theaters before returning to Spokane in 1915 as a featured artist. Crawford stepped onto the national scene when he moved to San Francisco the next year to work for the exhibitor Sid Grauman. He spent some months performing in Los Angeles theaters, where his most prestigious post was as organist at Grauman’s Million Dollar theater.<sup>57</sup> In 1921 A.J. Balaban convinced Crawford to move to Chicago to open the Balaban & Katz Tivoli theater, for which he assisted in the design of the Wurlitzer.<sup>58</sup> Crawford also provided advice on organ voicing and installation when he moved to the new Chicago theater later that year (Figure 4.11).<sup>59</sup>

We have already encountered the high-class Chicago theater—Balaban & Katz’s flagship house—in the context of Henry Murtagh’s career, which brought him to that theater in 1926. In the early 1920s, when his predecessor Crawford sat at the

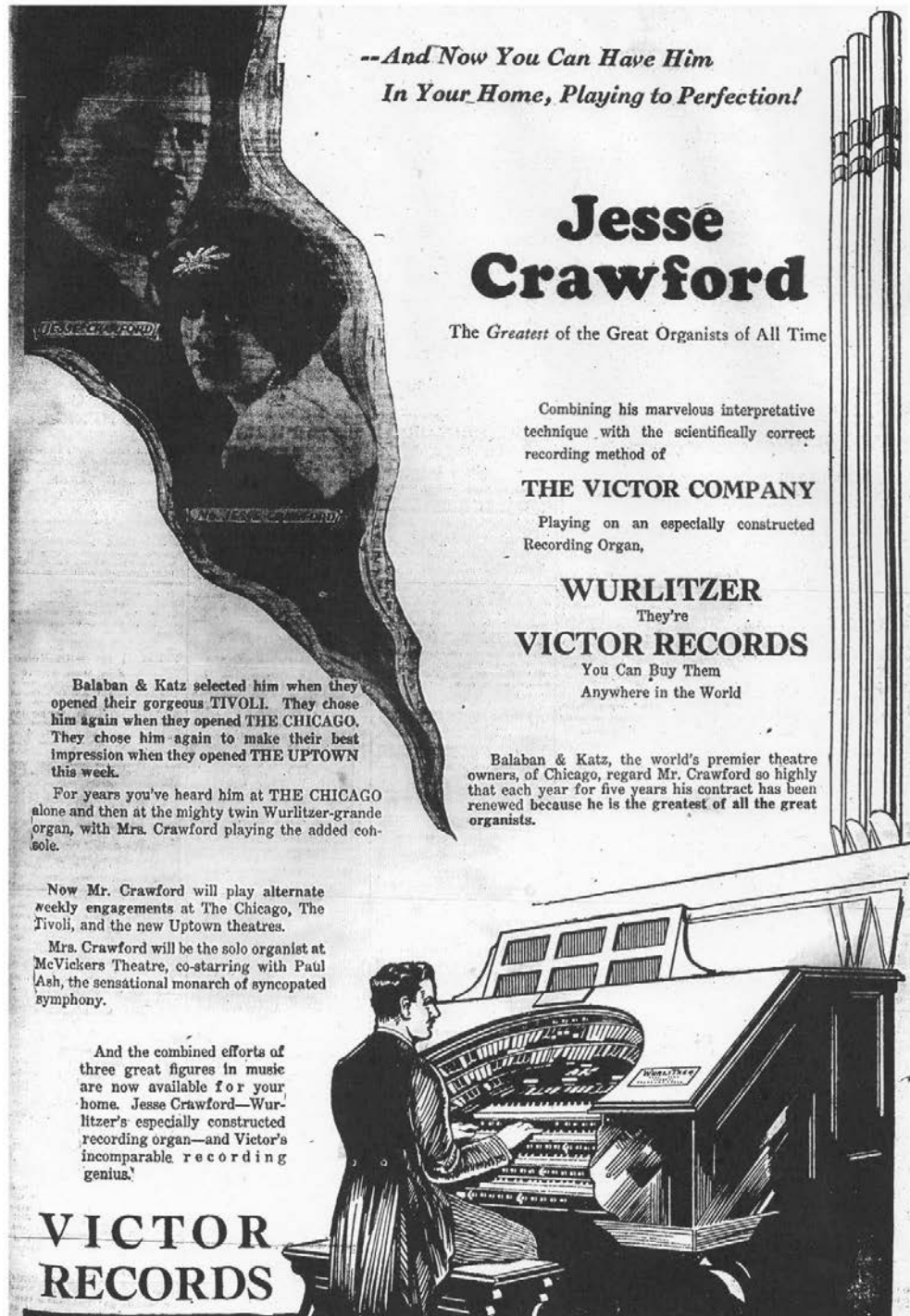
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56 John William Landon, “A Biography of Jesse Crawford, the Poet of the Theatre Pipe Organ” (PhD diss., Ball State University, 1972), 39.

57 Ibid., 48-55.

58 Ibid., 61-2.

59 Ibid., 64-65.



--And Now You Can Have Him  
In Your Home, Playing to Perfection!

# Jesse Crawford

The Greatest of the Great Organists of All Time

Combining his marvelous interpretative technique with the scientifically correct recording method of

**THE VICTOR COMPANY**

Playing on an especially constructed Recording Organ,

**WURLITZER**  
They're  
**VICTOR RECORDS**  
You Can Buy Them  
Anywhere in the World

Balaban & Katz selected him when they opened their gorgeous TIVOLI. They chose him again when they opened THE CHICAGO. They chose him again to make their best impression when they opened THE UPTOWN this week.

For years you've heard him at THE CHICAGO alone and then at the mighty twin Wurlitzer-grande organ, with Mrs. Crawford playing the added console.

Now Mr. Crawford will play alternate weekly engagements at The Chicago, The Tivoli, and the new Uptown theatres.

Mrs. Crawford will be the solo organist at McVickers Theatre, co-starring with Paul Ash, the sensational monarch of syncopated symphony.

And the combined efforts of three great figures in music are now available for your home. Jesse Crawford—Wurlitzer's especially constructed recording organ—and Victor's incomparable recording genius.

**VICTOR RECORDS**

**Figure 4.11:** This advertisement for Victor Records appeared in an August 1925 issue of *Variety* and dates from Crawford's time at the Chicago theater, at which point he was already a national celebrity. The text details his career and proclaims him to be "The Greatest of the Great Organists of All Time." The text also describes the activities of Mrs. Crawford and mentions Paul Ash, "the sensational monarch of syncopated symphony."

organ console, the 52-piece pit orchestra offered symphonies and operatic excerpts, and Crawford often joined in the performance of these works.<sup>60</sup> Crawford was highly regarded for his performances of popular song, but his repertoire at the Chicago consisted mostly of opera arias, classical numbers, and light classics.<sup>61</sup> There is no clear indication in the trade press that Crawford ever conducted community singing at the Chicago. All the same, a close reading of the reviews from his Chicago years reveals an ambivalence on the topic of community singing, a practice that was often out of sight but never out of mind.

A handful of reviews from 1926 give us a glimpse into organ-solo culture at the Chicago. One *Herald* writer remarked on a typical presentation: “Jesse Crawford at the organ playing excerpts from ‘Sylvia’ ballet, a straight classical number giving the crowd no chance to sing and getting a great hand. The number was worth it on straight merit and here’s a guess that relief from the singing thing generated additional appreciation.”<sup>62</sup> But why mention that there was no community singing when the only music in the program was from a ballet? There are two possible explanations. The first is that Crawford had sometimes led community singing. The second is that community singing was wildly popular in Chicago, and an organist who offered another form of entertainment was anomalous. Because of the absence of community singing accounts from Crawford’s 1926 reviews the second explanation seems more likely. Either way, as noted earlier, this reviewer’s negative view of community singing represented the typical attitude of trade professionals toward entertainment at the Chicago. (Henri Keates, on the other hand, was encountering no such opposition at the nearby Oriental.)

Other reviewers of Crawford’s solos at the Chicago echoed the establishment

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>62</sup> “Chicago Chicago,” *Exhibitors Herald*, September 4, 1926, 78.



position: they would mention explicitly that “the deadly community sing”<sup>63</sup> was not included and then praise Crawford for eschewing audience participation. In most of his solos Crawford performed popular numbers that could be sung, and he regularly projected the lyrics via slide. However, he did not ask the audience to join in, and this appears to have been all that was needed to prevent singing.<sup>64</sup>

There is no indication that Crawford, at any point in his career, explicitly directed an audience not to sing. Instead, he developed an arsenal of strategies to discourage participation. One of his techniques was to display a great deal of artistry in his rendition of a tune—using special effects, for instance, or providing a number of variations, which made participation difficult. Crawford’s techniques worked well: many reviewers would comment over the years that audiences preferred to sit and listen to Crawford’s exceptional playing instead of singing along. Crawford biographer John Landon reported yet another tactic employed by the organist to keep his audience quiet: whenever patrons burst into song Crawford would reduce his registration so as to become inaudible. To hear the organ, the patrons would have to abandon their singing and listen carefully. It is also possible that this tactic would have caused some embarrassment to those who had sung.<sup>65</sup>

In addition, we have some information about Crawford’s own attitude towards community singing. In 1939, the *New York Times* sought out the increasingly-forgotten Crawford and published a nostalgic piece on the decline of the organist’s career. In it, we learn that Crawford, “the man who taught the movie theatre organ to sing,” was supposedly the first organist to project the lyrics to the tunes he played, “so the audience could mentally follow [the organ’s] singing.”<sup>66</sup> Crawford would continue

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63 “Chicago Chicago,” *Exhibitors Herald*, September 11, 1926, 52.

64 “Chicago Chicago,” *Exhibitors Herald*, October 23, 1926, 57.

65 Landon, “A Biography of Jesse Crawford,” 123-4.

66 “The Lost Organist: An Epilogue to Jesse Crawford, Most Highly Paid Prologuist of the Boom,” *The New York Times*, April 9, 1939, X4.

to do so throughout his career, but he never intended for the audience to sing out loud. The article contains the following parenthetical disclaimer: “[Crawford] says disgustedly that the idea of the audience joining in, too, was a later corruption.” According to the *Times*, Crawford was indirectly responsible for the community singing phenomenon but was opposed to it from the start and never participated willingly.<sup>67</sup> Perhaps this is why *Variety* claimed in 1928 that Crawford, along with stage-show producer Ted Koehler, was “responsible for the organ community singing idea in the film houses of this town [Chicago].”<sup>68</sup> Or perhaps Crawford himself rewrote history in order to better suit his exalted position at the Paramount.

Crawford was the major star of the theater organ world, but for most of his career he did not work alone. In 1923 he met and married Helen Anderson, also an organist in the employment of Balaban & Katz. While Jesse was performing at the Chicago his wife was usually at another major B&K house, the McVickers, where she took over the console after Henri Keates left to open the Oriental. Helen also sometimes performed with her husband, and on such occasions she used a side console installed for her at the Chicago.<sup>69</sup> The McVickers was only a few blocks away from the Chicago, in that city’s downtown entertainment district, but the theaters were remarkably different in character. The McVickers was not a B&K design, but rather one of the many theaters that the exhibitors had taken over during their expansion in the 1920s. The McVickers was all but replaced by the B&K-commissioned Oriental in 1926, and was relegated to the bottom of the heap upon the departure of Keates and Paul Ash, as noted in the preceding chapter. With the new Oriental featuring B&K’s top talent around the corner and the flagship Chicago theater offering high-class entertainment just down the road, the McVickers struggled to attract an audience. In a bid for widespread

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., X4.

<sup>68</sup> “Organist Giving Extra Song Plug to Screen’s Film,” *Variety*, August 29, 1928, 20.

<sup>69</sup> Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats*, 187.



appeal, Mrs. Crawford abandoned any artistic aspirations and offered entertainment in the style of her predecessor Keates—that is to say, community singing.

Despite a lack of high display in her presentations, reviewers still noticed that Mrs. Crawford had a great deal of skill at the console. After her first performance, one writer noted that she played “infinitely better than her predecessor, Henri Keates,” although the singing response was weak due to greatly diminished attendance—most of Keates’s fans had followed him to the Oriental.<sup>70</sup> After a time, it seems that Mrs. Crawford moved away from community singing, perhaps inspired by her husband’s success at the Chicago. On one occasion she offered a song accompanied by lyric slides “without making the audience sing,”<sup>71</sup> while the next week she invited the audience to sing without insisting (in contrast to the tactics employed by many organists).<sup>72</sup> Throughout her tenure, critics admired her raw talent<sup>73</sup>—Mrs. Crawford had never taken a piano or organ lesson in her life<sup>74</sup>—and her ability to make challenging performances look quite effortless.<sup>75</sup> Of course, Mrs. Crawford gave up community singing entirely once she arrived with her husband at the New York Paramount. Once again, we see that every fine organist was able and willing to adapt his or her style to the clientele of the theater that offered employment.

Jesse Crawford’s first solo at the celebrated Paramount in Times Square, which opened on November 19, 1926, was highly anticipated and exhaustively reviewed. He did not disappoint. The *Variety* review, published as an independent article in the “Presentations” section, was overwhelming in its adulation: “At the new Paramount, New York, opening, he knocked an elite audience for a score of 1,000 to 0 with a

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70 “Chicago McVickers,” *Exhibitors Herald*, June 5, 1926, 55.

71 “Chicago McVickers,” *Exhibitors Herald*, September 4, 1926, 78.

72 “Chicago McVickers,” *Exhibitors Herald*, September 11, 1926, 52.

73 “Chicago McVickers,” *Exhibitors Herald*, June 12, 1926, 88.

74 Landon, “A Biography of Jesse Crawford,” 71.

75 “Chicago McVickers,” *Exhibitors Herald*, September 11, 1926, 52.

demonstration on an organ no one on Broadway believed was in a player or the instrument.”<sup>76</sup> For this momentous first appearance at the most important theater organ console in the world, Crawford crafted a unique solo that was ideally suited to his new position. Entitled “Organs I Have Played,” the solo was a tour through Crawford’s personal history as a theater organist. And his career was a classic American success story. In his solo presented at the Paramount, Crawford described and imitated each of the organs he had performed upon, doubtless with humorous effect. He noted the progress from each instrument to the next as well as his own development, and concluded that the Paramount organ was at last the instrument he had always dreamed of. The Paramount was his destiny.

Crawford could not have designed a more effective inaugural presentation. His appearance at this organ was the culmination of an entire career, the moment to which all of his experiences had led. The account would have allowed the patrons to regard Crawford as a real person, and it would have given them a sense of privilege to be here, in the Paramount, at the pinnacle of Crawford’s career. At the same time, the solo boosted the Paramount’s magnificent organ. Every new theater needed to promote its organ, which was its largest single investment. Crawford took this concern to a new level when he explicitly compared the Paramount organ to every other instrument he had played—and proclaimed it to be the greatest.

While the promotional elements of this solo would have been equally at home in the Brooklyn Paramount, in another respect this solo was uniquely suited to a flagship house. In the words of the enthusiastic *Variety* reviewer, Crawford made the presentation “educational for the masses.”<sup>77</sup> The idea that picture-palace entertainment should be both uplifting and educational was nearly universal among the class houses. Community singing, such as that practiced in Brooklyn, could hardly be

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76 “Jesse L. Crawford, ‘Organs I Have Played,’” *Variety*, November 24, 1926, 21.

77 “Jesse L. Crawford, ‘Organs I Have Played,’” 21.

expected to improve one's mind. A theater like the New York Paramount, however, sought to better its patrons with the finest music coupled with informative presentations. In the trade press, there was a generalized debate over whether or not it was the responsibility of exhibitors to improve the tastes of their patrons. At the Paramount, however, this matter had been settled. The Paramount existed to entertain *and* to enlighten.

After the Paramount's opening week, reviewers mentioned community singing—or its absence—on a regular basis. Even though it was not incorporated into the entertainment at the Paramount, community singing was indeed popular in New York, and every visitor to the theater was aware of its role in motion-picture entertainment. It took some time for Crawford to convince critics that the Paramount was a non-singing house—and even more time for him to convince his patrons.

In place of community singing, the Crawfords offered an eclectic mix of musical genres and performance styles. On occasion, Jesse Crawford staged a miniature recital of classical works, such as his all-Tchaikovsky program in December 1926.<sup>78</sup> Other times he featured “stirring march tunes,”<sup>79</sup> or solo excerpts from popular operas, such as *Cavalleria Rusticana*.<sup>80</sup> He often performed popular songs, sometimes alone and sometimes with the assistance of a concealed singer.<sup>81</sup> Jesse's wife Helen was renowned for her skill at syncopated playing and she did not often present classical works. When Helen joined him at the twin console she would usually offer uptempo, jazzy numbers, and the pair would close with a duet rendition of a hit song.<sup>82</sup> Helen, however, was also a flexible performer: in April 1927, to celebrate Easter, she joined her husband

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78 “Paramount (New York),” *Variety*, December 15, 1926, 20.

79 “Paramount (New York),” *Variety*, March 23, 1927, 23.

80 “Paramount (New York),” *Variety*, February 16, 1927, 22.

81 “Paramount (New York),” *Variety*, April 27, 1927.

82 “Mrs. Jesse Crawford,” *Variety*, March 9, 1927, 20.

in a dignified recital of religious songs.<sup>83</sup> In addition to the standard “great” console, which rose out of the pit on a lift, the Paramount added three additional consoles over the years: a “slave console,” installed on the other side of the pit, and two “skeleton” consoles that could be positioned anywhere on the stage. All consoles controlled the same organ (Figure 4.12).<sup>84</sup> This feature gave the Crawfords an enormous degree of mobility, which they used to enhance the drama of their performances. While they did project simple effects onto the scrim curtain, the Crawfords did not typically employ production elements or additional performers, as did some of the upscale organists. Jesse Crawford was his own biggest draw and wisely chose to remain in the spotlight.

Even though Crawford never intentionally led his patrons in singing, popular songs constituted the bulk of his repertoire, and when he performed a popular song he almost always projected the lyrics onto the screen via lantern slides. To read the slides was part of the entertainment, and they added a textual dimension to the performance. Early on there was considerable criticism of Crawford’s use of lyric slides. The general complaint was that they “cheapened” the organ solo and were inappropriate for a class house.<sup>85</sup>

But song slides had more than one purpose. In addition, they were linked to straightforward commercial interests—the practice of song plugging. For the most part critics were willing to accept Crawford’s plugs tongue-in-cheek (one of them noted that Crawford played a new Walter Donaldson number “just to be nice” to the publisher<sup>86</sup>), but at least one reviewer concluded his comments with the sarcastic observation that “the 20-song medley... is great stuff for the sheet music lobby

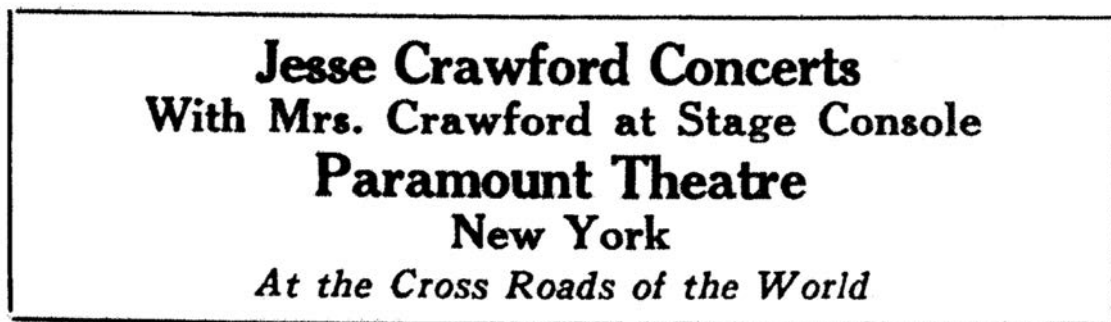
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83 “Paramount (New York),” *Variety*, April 20, 1927, 26.

84 New York City Chapter of the American Guild of Organists, “Paramount Theatre,” <http://www.nycago.org/Organs/NYC/html/ParamountTheatre.html> (accessed March 2, 2013)

85 “Paramount (New York),” *Variety*, April 6, 1927, 26.

86 “Paramount (New York),” *Variety*, June 6, 1928, 39.



**Figure 4.12:** This advertisement appeared in an August 1927 edition of *Exhibitors Herald*. It explicitly mentions the stage console at which Helen Crawford regularly performed. It also emphasizes the cosmopolitan character of the New York Paramount and suggests with the term “concert” that only high-class entertainment would be found there.

sales' gross."<sup>87</sup> Song plugging was not Crawford's own idea. As a Paramount employee, he was obliged to promote Paramount-Publix products, including songs from Paramount films and music that was available for purchase at the New York Paramount theater.<sup>88</sup> Most reviewers simply accepted the practice, which was universal among the major studio-owned picture-palace chains.

Crawford did not only use slides to project song lyrics. They also constituted his sole means of personal contact with the patrons. That Crawford communicated with his audience via slides on opening night can be explained in terms of the available technology: the public address system was not available in theaters until 1927<sup>89</sup> and would not become widespread for another year.<sup>90</sup> However, even though Crawford remained at the Paramount for a number of years after public address technology had been perfected, he never spoke to his public.<sup>91</sup> Other organists quickly adopted the new development and used the public address system to promote a sense of intimacy with their patrons. But it was precisely this informal intimacy that was considered to be inappropriate in an upscale house. Instead, the class organist cultivated an image of artistic authority. Crawford's projected messages revealed him to be personable and even funny, but his silence assured that he remain distant and unattainable.

The delicacy of this boundary between organist and audience is illustrated in the review of a June 1929 solo by Mrs. Crawford. In a message to the audience, projected onto the screen via lantern slides, Mrs. Crawford informed the patrons that her

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87 "Paramount," *Variety*, August 14, 1929, 41. This is probably the same reviewer as before, but he had grown tired of Crawford's song plugging.

88 "Paramount," *Variety*, March 26, 1930, 52.

89 "Organ Solos: Don Isham," *Exhibitors Herald*, August 6, 1927, 49.

90 "New Device Invented For Organists by Anthony," *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, October 13, 1928, 45.

91 As a *Variety* reviewer wrote in late 1930, "Mr. Crawford does not speak to his audiences" ("Paramount, N.Y.," *Variety*, December 27, 1930, 45).

husband was away on vacation, having left herself and the baby behind.<sup>92</sup> While we might interpret this message as a simple explanation of Crawford's unusual absence, the *Variety* reviewer objected to the gesture on the basis that the "Paramount is a pretty high class picture house to have considerable personal stuff thrown upon the sheet."<sup>93</sup> Mrs. Crawford's announcement was well-received, but the reviewer's discomfort with the revelation of personal information tells us a great deal about what was expected at a class house like the Paramount.

In early reviews, critics did not know how to react to the potential for community singing at the New York Paramount. It is possible that Crawford himself was unsure whether or not the Paramount audience wanted to engage in community singing, although it is clear that he never encouraged it. The first two *Variety* reviews of his playing, probably penned by the same critic in late 1926, engaged with the issue of community singing head-on. Crawford's second-week solo at the Paramount was a "miniature organ recital" featuring four items: a new organ composition, the novelty piano number "Nola," the finale from "William Tell," and an unnamed popular song accompanied by slides. While the audience remained silent during the popular song, the *Variety* reviewer did not dismiss this as an expected reaction (as he would a month later). Instead, he observed that "Crawford couldn't get 'em to sing here" and suggested that "it may have been too early in the morning for the vocal calisthenics."<sup>94</sup> It is clear that the position of the Paramount as a singing or non-singing house was still in flux.

After an initial two-year period during which the Paramount established its reputation as a non-singing house, its patrons actually began to vocalize in late 1928. An

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92 In her solo, Mrs. Crawford employed the typical means of organist communication used at the Paramount and similar houses: she wrote her own verses and set them to a popular tune, which she played on the organ. In this case we do not know what the tune was, but we can assume that it was easily recognized by the audience. The newly-composed lyrics were not intended to be read aloud or sung. Instead, patrons would read the lyrics silently in time to the music and produce an internalized performance through which the message was communicated. Audience members were used to reading lyric slides in order to gather information about the organ solo.

93 "Paramount (New York)," *Variety*, June 29, 1927, 28.

94 Skig, "Paramount (New York)," *Variety*, December 1, 1926, 13.

analysis of the trade press reveals a notable upward trend in audience participation at the Paramount between December 1928 and March 1929. During these months Crawford’s solos elicited singing more often than not, and in the following month, April, reviewers made a point of remarking upon the absence of singing. Why had the patrons at the Paramount suddenly taken to singing at the end of 1928? It would appear that the New York Paramount was being influenced by the newly-opened Brooklyn Paramount and, more generally, by Brooklyn’s burgeoning community-singing culture. The Brooklyn Paramount opened in November 1928. It is unlikely to be coincidence that community singing began to surface at the New York Paramount in December. And yet, after March 1929, community singing was no longer a regular practice during Crawford’s solos, and it had disappeared completely by early 1931.

Because it was not explicitly invited by Crawford, community singing at the New York Paramount was quite unlike that in Brooklyn. The low-key vocalisms that Crawford provoked were never described as energetic or raucous. In addition, this participation did not always constitute “singing” per se. In August 1928 (several months *before* the Brooklyn Paramount opened), the audience hummed along with a current waltz tune played by Crawford. The reviewer excused their lapse in behavior with the explanation that “the waltz and softer melodies are coming back.”<sup>95</sup> This account also illustrates another element of participation at the New York Paramount: it almost only occurred during well-known musical numbers. In these cases, the audience remained silent until the final tune, one which they recognized and could not resist humming along with. In January 1929 patrons sang another recent hit, “I Faw Down an’ Go Boom.” Popularized by the likes of Billy Murray and Eddie Cantor, this song was quickly becoming a favorite with singing audiences across the country—in the next two months it would appear with great success at the Brooklyn Paramount,<sup>96</sup> the

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95 Sid, “Paramount (New York),” *Variety*, August 22, 1928, 44.

96 “Organ Solos: Henry B. Murtagh,” *Exhibitors Herald World*, March 16, 1929, 53.



Chicago Oriental,<sup>97</sup> and Lloyd's theater in Menominee, Michigan.<sup>98</sup> In all probability, many of the Paramount patrons would have already sung "I Faw Down an' Go Boom" in other New York City theaters.

When reviewers did not explain audience singing as a natural response to a familiar and beloved tune, they often suggested that it had been provoked by Crawford's exceptional musicianship. In November 1929, the audience joined in with Crawford's performance of "Singin' in the Rain." The *Herald* reviewer, after dismissing the occasion as a fluke, attributed the unexpected participation to "Crawford's masterly playing," which "forced the audience to burst forth in song."<sup>99</sup>

In only one case did a reviewer suggest that singing at the Paramount was actually expected, though in this case Crawford worked explicitly to undermine its success. In December 1928 (shortly *after* the Brooklyn Paramount had opened) Crawford offered a presentation that relied upon audience participation. The solo was entitled "Popular Song Parade." In it, Crawford played only the beginning of each song, then quickly abandoned it for the next. In the words of the *Herald* reviewer, "the audience... had only time to begin to hum or sing one song when the organ started another."<sup>100</sup> It was surely not a coincidence that Crawford presented this unique solo soon after the opening of the Brooklyn Paramount. It might well have been a conscious jab at community-singing culture, which Crawford disdained but could not ignore.

The most important aspect of this December 1928 solo, however, is the *Herald* review. Here we find the only mention of community singing at the New York Paramount in which the reviewer failed to exhibit surprise that it took place. Through-

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97 "Organ Solos: Preston Sellers," *Exhibitors Herald World*, February 25, 1929, 46.

98 "Organ Solos: Kenneth T. Wright," *Exhibitors Herald World*, February 9, 1929, 62.

99 "Organ Solos: Jesse Crawford," *Exhibitors Herald World*, November 9, 1929, 68. This explanation contradicts other trade-press commentary in which reviewers suggest that the Paramount audience does *not* sing for precisely the same reason (for an example, see Bige, "Film House Reviews: Paramount, B'klyn," *Variety*, November 12, 1930, 53).

100 "Organ Solos: Jesse Crawford," *Exhibitors Herald and Motion Picture World*, December 8, 1928, 56.

out the brief period in which community singing occurred regularly at the Paramount, the trade-press critics refused to accept it as a part of the entertainment. When the audience hummed along with Crawford’s program of waltz tunes, for example, the reviewer expressed surprise and described the Paramount as “a house where they never open their mouths.”<sup>101</sup> When the patrons joined in on the song “I Faw Down an’ Go Boom,” the reviewer noted that singing “is quite unusual for this house.”<sup>102</sup> When Crawford played “All By Yourself in the Moonlight,” the reviewer observed that “this audience sang, where they have never sung before.”<sup>103</sup> But of course this was not true. Singing occurred almost every week at the Paramount in late 1928 and early 1929. The trade press was simply not reporting what was happening at the Paramount.

In a review of a solo from February 1929 that did not inspire singing, we read that “no one sings at the house, and Crawford does not try to make them.”<sup>104</sup> While the latter statement was certainly true, the notion that “no one sings” at the Paramount was clearly false. More accurately, the review ought to have read, “no one *should* sing.” Trade professionals and theatergoers alike understood the class connotations of community singing, but trade reviewers used their position to try to enforce normative behavior. Organists read these reviews, and they understood what exhibitors expected of them. The “class” audience was to remain silent.

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<sup>101</sup> Sid, “Paramount (New York),” *Variety*, August 22, 1928, 44.

<sup>102</sup> “Organ Solos: Jesse Crawford,” *Exhibitors Herald World*, January 12, 1929, 55.

<sup>103</sup> “Organ Solos: Jesse Crawford,” *Exhibitors Herald World*, March 2, 1929, 47.

<sup>104</sup> “Organ Solos: Jesse Crawford,” *Exhibitors Herald World*, February 9, 1929, 62.

## CHAPTER 5

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# COMMUNITY SINGING AND LOCAL OUTREACH

**T**HE PREVIOUS CHAPTERS have introduced us to a number of organists. Each of these men and women had different performance styles, stage personas, and favored repertoires, and each suited his or her talents to the requirements of the theater that offered employment. However, all of them had one important factor in common: employment in a theater located centrally in a downtown area. For organists and exhibitors, location determined their approach to entertainment. Downtown theaters were conveniently situated amid shopping and dining destinations, and they were highly visible to out-of-towners. Therefore, these theaters relied heavily on itinerant patronage. Any single patron might attend infrequently, but an itinerant theater could count on steady box office numbers all the same.<sup>1</sup>

This situation had a significant effect on the presentation of entertainment. Success was guaranteed primarily by location, often with the aid of big-name performers, lavish stage acts, and first-run films. Since any individual patron might never return, exhibitors did not trouble to build a sense of community or to link the theater with local interests. Instead, they focused only on satisfying the customers who appeared in the theater for each show. The sole duty of an organist at a downtown theater,

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<sup>1</sup> Theatre Historical Society of America, *Oriental Theatre* (Annual No. 24, 1994), 3.

therefore, was to entertain whoever happened to be in the house.

Organists in neighborhood theaters had other concerns.<sup>2</sup> These theaters depended on community support and patronage. Exhibitors were eager to keep neighborhood residents from patronizing the flashier, better-appointed downtown theaters, for if locals stopped attending the local picture show, that theater would go bankrupt. As a consequence, exhibitors sought to secure local patronage by promoting community spirit and by joining forces with local businesses and organizations. Neighborhood organists played an important role in attracting a local audience as well. Like their downtown counterparts, neighborhood organists were engaged to entertain the patrons sitting in the seats. They offered many of the same solos, used the same slides, and led community singing of the same songs. However, these organists presented their entertainment with a local flavor that appealed to neighborhood patrons and they used gimmicks to encourage regular visits to the theater.

At the Chicago Harding, a large neighborhood theater in the Balaban & Katz chain, the organist was almost solely responsible for the success of his theater. This chapter will be devoted primarily to the career of Eddie Meikel, organist at the Harding, and will discuss his tactics for attracting and maintaining an enthusiastic local patronage. Toward the end it will turn briefly to another organist, Irene Juno, who also appealed to community interests with her organ solos. Juno, as we shall see, was concerned with the parents and educators who monitored motion picture entertainment for children, and whose stamp of approval she required as music director for children's matinees at the Crandall chain in Washington, DC.

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<sup>2</sup> These concerns applied to small-town theaters as well, but the topic of the present chapter is the neighborhood theater.

## The Chicago Harding

### *Introduction*

The Harding theater was located in the Logan Square neighborhood of Chicago, a district some six miles to the Northwest of the Loop (the theater no longer stands). Construction began under the auspices of Lubliner & Trinz, a competing Chicago exhibition firm, but the Harding became the property of Balaban & Katz due to a merger on July 15, 1925.<sup>3</sup> The 2,962-seat theater opened its doors on October 12.<sup>4</sup> The Harding was designed in the Italian Renaissance and Neoclassical style by Freidstein and Company (Figure 5.1). It belonged to a trio of similar theaters that included the Congress and the Tower (these two theaters came into the possession of B&K some years later),<sup>5</sup> but the Harding surpassed its siblings and was by all accounts among Chicago's "most elaborate" neighborhood houses (Figure 5.2). It cost a fantastic two million dollars to construct and, like most urban theaters, was installed in a large commercial structure that also contained offices and storefronts. While small compared to B&K theaters in the Loop, the Harding was among the largest theaters in the Logan Square neighborhood. It offered three complete shows each weekday and four on the weekend.<sup>6</sup>

A neighborhood theater of the 1920s and '30s differed enormously from its downtown brethren. On paper, the Harding appears to have been quite similar to the Balaban & Katz palaces found in the Loop. Although the Harding was smaller, all of the B&K theaters showed the same films, presented the same stage acts, offered the same standard of service, and used the same programming formula. The Harding,

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3 David Balaban, *The Chicago Movie Palaces of Balaban and Katz* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), 72.

4 Ibid., 40.

5 Ibid., 80-81.

6 "Harding," *Variety*, October 21, 1925, 32.



**Figure 5.1:** The exterior of the Chicago Harding. Courtesy Chicago Architectural Photographing Co. Collection, Theatre Historical Society.





**Figure 5.2:** The Harding's lobby. Courtesy Chicago Architectural Photographing Co. Collection, Theatre Historical Society.

however, offered these entertainment features at a disadvantage. To begin with, the Harding was not among Chicago's first-run theaters, which at the time included only B&K's Chicago, Roosevelt, and McVickers, RKO's State-Lake, Warner's Orpheum, and the independent Monroe (all located in the Loop).<sup>7</sup> Instead, the Harding received films booked by the B&K chain only after they had completed runs in other palaces. A similar arrangement governed the stage at that theater. The Harding was able to boast the same stage presentations that were seen at the Chicago but could only offer the shows some weeks later, after they had passed through the Uptown.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the Harding did not get exclusive access to the outdated stage shows. When the presentation acts finally reached the neighborhood they were paired with a local 24-piece orchestra directed by Benjamin Paley and then shared between the Harding and the Senate. The house temporarily without the stage show featured Art Kahn and his Ash-style stage band instead.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the Harding was denied access to the true superstars of the B&K chain. The resident musicians were highly capable, but they didn't have the drawing power of Paul Ash at the McVickers or Jesse Crawford at the Chicago. Any Logan Square resident who wanted to hear the best stage band and see the latest acts could easily travel downtown for a show. A patron would only stay close to home if the Harding had something special to offer.

All neighborhood theaters faced this challenge, and they all responded with essentially the same strategy. To provide something that the downtown palaces could not, a neighborhood theater emphasized its local connections. This entailed two different sorts of actions. Inside the theater, management offered entertainment uniquely

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7 "Chicago First Runs," *Exhibitors Herald*, October 24, 1925, 52.

8 "Harding," *Variety*, November 18, 1925, 40.

9 "Harding (Chicago)," *Variety*, August 18, 1926, 52. In August 1926, B&K instituted an Ash policy in which three stage bands rotated between the Harding, Senate, and Belmont (all neighborhood houses). One band was directed by Kahn and one by the newcomer Mark Fisher (later to be master of ceremonies at the Harding), while the third band was in fact Paley and his orchestra "converted to a stage attraction" ("Harding (Chicago)," *Variety*, September 22, 1926, 19).



suited to the interests of the local populace, or even utilized the patrons' talents. Local events were promoted and celebrated. Patrons were on friendly terms with the manager and with one another, and could expect to see familiar faces. In short, these theaters developed an atmosphere of camaraderie and neighborhood spirit. Outside the theater, the managers of neighborhood houses took a strong interest in community affairs, supporting local youth organizations, developing tie-ins with the local merchants, donating tickets to the community's less fortunate, and operating benefit performances near holidays.<sup>10</sup> Often, the manager himself would be a prominent figure in community work, which would in turn generate good will and fierce loyalty to the theater.<sup>11</sup> When a neighborhood theater was functioning properly it was viewed not as an entertainment venue or a profit-driven business but as a community center. Local residents were encouraged to take pride in their theater, and the theater in turn was expected to make the community a better place in which to live and do business.<sup>12</sup>

The neighborhood theater of the mid 1920s also attracted a different demographic than did the downtown palace. While all classes attended—or were at least reputed to attend—the lavish downtown venues, the neighborhood theaters specifically attracted a working-class crowd. In practice, downtown theaters drew primarily middle- and upper-class patrons, while the working class stayed close to home so as to enjoy the convenience of proximity, the lower ticket prices, and the neighborhood culture.<sup>13</sup> In terms of character, the neighborhood theater was a hybrid between the contemporary picture palace and the early nickelodeon, an exhibition model which had thrived on local working-class attendance. Neighborhood theaters of the 1920s were larger than nickelodeons, usually seating between 300 and 1,000 patrons, and they offered an

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10 "Good Will Show Proper For Xmas," *Exhibitors Herald*, December 17, 1927, 39.

11 "What is the Value of Your Goodwill in the Community?," *Exhibitors Herald*, November 5, 1927, 46.

12 "Your Theatre a Community Asset," *Exhibitors Herald*, December 24, 1927, 12.

13 Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 100.

entertainment program based on that of the downtown palace, although budgetary constraints reduced the extravagance of the sets and the number of performers. Films were both selected and altered to suit the patrons, while stage shows and musical acts reflected the ethnicity of the local populace. Lizabeth Cohen, a scholar of Chicago's neighborhood theaters, sums up their appeal to the local workers: "For much of the decade, working-class patrons found the neighborhood theater not only more affordable but more welcoming, as the spirit of the community carried over into the local movie hall. Chicago workers may have savored the exotic on the screen, but they preferred encountering it in familiar company."<sup>14</sup>

In many ways, though, the Harding was an atypical example of a neighborhood theater. To begin with, at nearly 3,000 seats it was much larger than the average. The Harding also offered a higher standard of musical entertainment than the typical neighborhood house, which could afford to employ only a keyboardist (piano or organ) or a small instrumental ensemble.<sup>15</sup> The Harding management had only limited control over the programming, since films, stage shows, and bandleaders were prescribed by Balaban & Katz. Logan Square was a predominantly Polish neighborhood, but any locals who desired ethnically flavored entertainment must have found it in other theaters.<sup>16</sup> We do know that the Harding catered to a local, working-class clientele and that it fulfilled the same social role as other neighborhood houses.

The Harding is an attractive candidate for this case study, though, because it belonged to the all-important Balaban & Katz chain. Additionally, this study must rely upon national trade-press coverage of organ entertainment, which the smaller theaters never received. And indeed, even in the case of the Harding there is a shortage

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14 Lizabeth Cohen, "Encountering Mass Culture at the Grassroots," *American Quarterly* 41.1 (March 1989), 14-16.

15 Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, "Sound Comes to the Movies," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 118.1/2 (Jan.-Apr. 1994), 8.

16 Joseph Parot, "The Racial Dilemma in Chicago's Polish Neighborhoods, 1920-1970," *Polish American Studies* 32.2 (Autumn 1975), 30.

of trade press accounts, to the point that it is sometimes difficult to draw conclusions. For example, there were 42 trade-press reviews of organ solos at the Harding between 1925 and 1929, whereas there were 154 reviews for the Oriental between 1926 and 1932. In addition to these reviews, however, the *Exhibitors Herald* also published a number of articles specifically about the Harding, including an article and a letter written by the Harding's organist, Eddie Meikel (Figure 5.3). Most of the trade-press accounts describe the extraordinary success of Meikel's Organ Club, which generated a great deal of industry talk in the late 1920s.

The opening of the Harding on October 19, 1925, exemplifies many of the commercial strategies that allowed a neighborhood theater to succeed. That splendid affair is best captured in the words of the *Herald*:

The pageant in celebration of the opening of the new theatre lasted eight days. On the night of the opening the streets of three locations were roped off for dancing. Bands played. A parade held the attention of a multitude. A public marriage was performed before the festal crowds. Each day differed from the other.

Friday was children's day. A special mardi gras was theirs.

October 19, the final day of the festivities, the girls living in the vicinity of the theatre took part in a beauty contest.<sup>17</sup>

The author noted that this wild celebration in the streets actually prevented people from entering the theater during its grand opening period, but he went on to praise the exhibitors for the clever marketing and foresight behind the public production. Even if money was lost, "the effect of the carnival was of great value to the establishment of an amiable spirit towards the Harding," and as a neighborhood theater the Harding was to rely entirely on this "amiable spirit."<sup>18</sup>

The street festival was neither the beginning nor the end of the publicity put together for the Harding's opening week. The management of the theater arranged for a ten-page spread concerning the Harding to be issued as a supplement to the

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17 "Harding Publicity Draws Thousands," *Exhibitors Herald*, October 31, 1925, 47.

18 *Ibid.*, 47.



*Ed. Meikel*

**Figure 5.3:** This photograph of Eddie Meikel was published in *Exhibitors Herald* in November 1927. By this time, he was well-known to exhibitors throughout the nation for his innovative community-singing programs.

October 12 edition of the *Chicago Evening American* (Figure 5.4). From this feature, locals learned that on opening night their tickets were to be taken by none other than comedian and singer Eddie Cantor. The tickets were to be sold by his Ziegfeld co-star Mary Eaton, a dancer. Reviewers gave these two celebrities some of the credit for the 200-yard line that formed before the first performance at 6 pm.<sup>19</sup> Once in the theater, patrons were treated to another surprise. The feature film, First National's "What Fools, Men," had been shot in Chicago—and it appears that some footage of a monument in the Logan Square neighborhood was incorporated into the film especially for its run at the Harding. The familiar sight "drew thunderous applause when flashed on the screen."<sup>20</sup>

### *Early Organ Solos*

The Harding's first organist was Edward K. House, who had previously been at the Tivoli in Chicago.<sup>21</sup> He spent his career rotating among B&K houses and was to be found at the Oriental six years later. House was only reviewed once while at the Harding, a month after that theater opened, and he moved on soon thereafter. Although the solo in question had lasted for only five minutes, it proved to be a disaster far beyond its modest proportions. House, who "has a bad conception of what audiences want," featured a pop number that had failed to make inroads with the music-loving public. After his straight version with slides met with an icy reception, House tried to engage the patrons in a song contest. No-one sang, and his solo concluded in dead silence, all applause withheld.<sup>22</sup> A month later, House was replaced by Eddie Meikel, although a reason for the substitution was never published in the trade press.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>20</sup> "Cost Estimated at \$2,000,000," *Exhibitors Herald*, October 31, 1925, 47.

<sup>21</sup> "Old Fashioned Movies," *Variety*, March 4, 1925, 35.

<sup>22</sup> "Harding," *Variety*, November 18, 1925, 40.

# New \$2,000,000 HARDING THEATRE OPENS TODAY!

## LUBLINER & TRINZ CELEBRATE 16th BIRTHDAY

**FILM PALACE IS TERMED CASTLE OF DREAMS**

*A Castle of Dreams!*



**WHERE YOU SEE 'L&T' - IT'S A GOOD PICTURE!**

**FIRM CITY'S GREATEST THEATER BUILDER**

**Lubliner & Trinz' Sixteenth Anniversary**

*After building of the four \$2,000,000 Harding Theatres, Lubliner & Trinz, Mark the Sixteenth Birthday in Lubliner & Trinz*

**LETTER, SAY PROTESTS**

**NEW THEATRE PRICES**

The managers of the new opening...  
 As Lubliner & Trinz...  
 The Chicago Building...  
 The new...  
 The...  
 The...

These...  
 The...  
 The...  
 The...  
 The...

**THE HARDING THEATRE** is the first of NINE new Cinema Palaces promised the public by Lubliner & Trinz within the coming year.

**CHICAGO BUILDING**

**LUBLINER & TRINZ** have dotted the city with twenty-nine motion picture theatres now opening, under construction, or planned.

Figure 5.4: Exhibitors Herald reproduced the front page of the October 12 Chicago Evening American to accompany its article on the Harding's successful opening.

Meikel also struggled initially. In his first week he offered a typical introductory solo, entitled “The Family Album,” which featured a comedic overview of Meikel and his relatives. While the solo did not include community singing, it was a success, although the *Variety* reviewer observed that it had only passed muster because it “fitted the occasion,” and that Meikel would have to do better if he wished to make a career for himself at the Harding.<sup>23</sup>

Following the reviews of its opening, the trade press ignored the Harding entirely until April of the next year, 1926, when the *Herald* published its first review of the theater. This was to be expected: the Harding was important because of its location (Chicago) and affiliation (Balaban & Katz), but it offered very little unique entertainment and was not a leader in the exhibition industry. The *Herald* had published a full-page article on the theater’s opening only because the management employed excellent promotional techniques that others might want to emulate, a high-priority concern for that publication. In the *Herald*’s belated review, however, Meikel did not fare well: “The only weak spot on the bill was that in which Edward Meikel, organist, sat.”<sup>24</sup> It seems that Meikel had attempted to lead community singing with a set of humorous lyric slides, but very few patrons had joined in and “the whole affair was a dud.”<sup>25</sup>

Given the extraordinary success that Meikel was about to achieve with community singing, this account is fascinating. It may be, of course, that the *Herald* reviewer considered the solo to be a bigger flop than it really was. The Chicago *Herald* reviewers, after all, were often critical of community singing. However, that same journal (and probably the same author) began to provide Meikel with very positive reviews one year later, while praise from *Variety* was forthcoming in only three weeks. In this short time, surely, Meikel did not become a better organist or showman, nor were

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23 “Harding, Chicago,” *Variety*, December 23, 1925, 33.

24 “‘Madame Butterfly’ Bit Hits; Paley’s Violin Solo Pleases,” *Exhibitors Herald*, April 3, 1926, 38.

25 *Ibid.*, 38.

his patrons replaced by a set more interested in singing. The only change was in his approach to community singing.

### *Meikel Develops the Organ Club*

For a neighborhood organist, Meikel attracted an extraordinary amount of attention from *Variety* beginning in April 1926. The first review of his new idea in organ presentation was short, but it described the activities that had begun to take place at the Harding quite accurately: “Edward Meikel’s novel Organ Club is gaining in popularity. Meikel instituted in Chicago the novel stunt of using ‘request’ programs, and having the names of the requesters projected on the screen. The Harding fares take to it strongly.”<sup>26</sup> While the Organ Club idea was still to develop further, this early account hit upon the key to Meikel’s success.

Meikel must have observed that the Harding attracted an audience of neighborhood regulars, patrons who attended the theater every week and were largely familiar with one another. In addition, Meikel himself was the only live performer who was present at every show. Art Kahn’s stage band alternated with the Chicago presentation unit, such that Kahn was only at the Harding every other week. This arrangement offered Meikel the unique opportunity to connect with his audience on a personal level and to incorporate neighborhood patrons directly into the show. He began with a simple plan. Regular patrons were invited to submit requests, a procedure which was not uncommon among theater organists. During the organ solo, however, Meikel publicly displayed the name of each Harding patrons who had made a request. This unusual (and possibly unprecedented) tactic had two effects. First, patrons were thrilled to see their own names and to feel that they were a part of the show and the theater family. Second, patrons read the names of their friends and neighbors on the screen, which reinforced the notion that the Harding was a neighborhood institution

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<sup>26</sup> “Harding,” *Variety*, April 28, 1926, 53.



that fostered local community spirit. One reviewer noted “exclamations of recognition from all portions of the house” when the names were posted, an account which confirms the immediate impact of Meikel’s request lists on his patrons.<sup>27</sup> Another observed that Meikel’s “audiences enter with the hope of getting in some personal notes.”<sup>28</sup> Audience members loved both to be publicly recognized and to recognize those around them, an experience that only a neighborhood theater could offer. The idea must have met with instant success, for the very next issue of *Variety* featured a paid advertisement for Edward Meikel and his Organ Club (Figure 5.5). Balaban & Katz would not have invested in this sort of publicity unless they believed that Meikel’s new idea had the potential for large box office returns (Figure 5.6).

One week later, *Variety* reviewed Meikel’s work at the Harding again. This time, the reviewer made an explicit comparison with Henri Keates’s community sings at the McVickers, pointing out that community singing was not new to Chicago and that singing served the same purpose at both the Harding and the McVickers: “it thaws out the audience” and prepared them to enjoy the stage show in good humor. However, the reviewer also noted that “Meikel has gone one better” than Keates with his Organ Club idea, which produced even more successful results. In the show observed, Meikel extended the period of community singing beyond the standard time allotment for an organ solo, to the delight of his enthusiastic club members. In the view of the trade press, Meikel had latched onto something unique and highly lucrative.<sup>29</sup>

When *Variety* wished to feature an exceptional presentation whose basic idea others would be advised to consider, the journal extracted the offering from the *Film House Review* column, where entire programs were summarized, and instead printed an extended review under *New Acts*. Meikel achieved this honor in August 1926. The

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27 “The Organ Club,” *Variety*, August 25, 1926, 25.

28 “Harding,” *Variety*, November 9, 1927, 26.

29 “Harding,” *Variety*, May 12, 1926, 20.

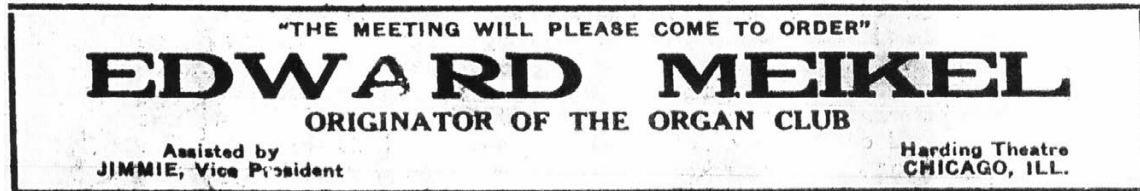


Figure 5.5: A *Variety* ad for Eddie Meikel and his Organ Club, published in May 1926.

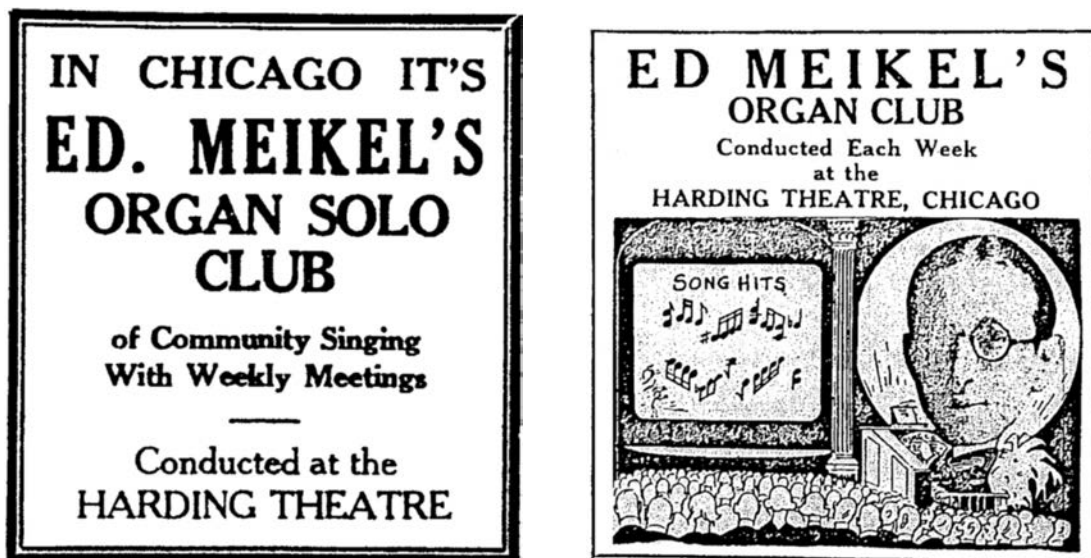


Figure 5.6: These two advertisements were both published in *Exhibitors Herald*: the first in August 1927 and the second in February 1928. By this time, Meikel's Organ Club was heavily advertised across the trade press.

review was printed “by request,” perhaps on behalf of the many readers who had inquired about Meikel’s work. Near the top of the review, *Variety* included a warning to any who sought to imitate Meikel’s strategy: “It must be remembered that the Harding is a neighborhood theatre and that portions of his stunt would not work in downtown or ‘transient’ houses.”<sup>30</sup> Trade professionals recognized the difference between a neighborhood house like the Harding, which catered to a regular, local clientele, and a transient house like the McVickers or soon-to-open Oriental, which often entertained visitors to the city and could not risk alienating the out-of-towner. Meikel took full advantage of his position as a neighborhood organist.

### *Features of the Organ Club*

Initially, membership in Meikel’s Organ Club was not a formal affair. His patrons did not fill out applications or receive membership cards, although some of Meikel’s imitators later used such devices. Instead, the initial “Organ Club” was a vague and fluid institution to which all patrons belonged by merit of their attendance.<sup>31</sup> Later, Meikel accepted letters from his patrons in which they requested membership, and he assembled a mailing list of members to whom he sent updates in the form of “Club Letters.”<sup>32</sup> With or without formal membership the notion of a “Club” was valuable, for it encouraged regular attendance and fostered a sense of belonging and civic pride.

Each meeting of the Organ Club opened with an official “call to order,” which set Meikel’s feature apart from the rest of the program and indicated that this was not an ordinary organ solo.<sup>33</sup> The call to order also shifted the balance of power in

<sup>30</sup> “The Organ Club,” *Variety*, August 25, 1926, 25.

<sup>31</sup> “Harding,” *Variety*, May 12, 1926, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Ed. Meikel, “Community Sings Passing? Not Yet, Says Organist,” *Exhibitors Herald*, November 26, 1927, 25.

<sup>33</sup> “Harding,” *Variety*, August 18, 1926, 52.

the theater. The organist in every picture house was a performer and therefore could never achieve a friendly, engaging equality with his patrons. In high-class theaters that featured artistic entertainment this did not present a problem. In theaters that sought a more relaxed atmosphere, however, there was a variety of means by which an organist could bridge the gap between performer and audience. Meikel's call to order transformed the Harding's constituency from passive consumers into participating club members, and it transformed Meikel himself from distant musician to social-club president—still in charge, but of a kind with his patrons.

The core feature of the club, as already mentioned, was Meikel's displaying of names of all those who had submitted requests. After some months, though, Meikel had to discontinue this aspect of the program because his club had grown much too large and, "owing to the limitations of time," he could not possibly include every name.<sup>34</sup> Instead, Meikel incorporated the names of his club members into the program on a variety of other pretexts. First he began to list the names of local brides and grooms, accompanied by the community singing of comic songs with which the patrons conveyed their best wishes.<sup>35</sup> Later, he listed the birthdays of club members each week. (This was only possible once patrons began to register their membership in 1927.) While the list of member birthdays was on display, Meikel led the singing of a special "Birthday Song" that he had composed himself and that all of the members had memorized.<sup>36</sup> Anniversaries, births, and any other cause for community celebration also found a place in Meikel's presentations, and the appropriate song for the occasion always made an appearance.<sup>37</sup> In his attempt to personally incorporate patrons into the program, Meikel did not limit himself to names: to celebrate Mother's Day in 1927, he projected photographs of local mothers

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34 Meikel, "Community Sings Passing?," 25.

35 "The Organ Club," *Variety*, August 25, 1926, 25.

36 "Harding," *Variety*, November 9, 1927, 26.

37 Meikel, "Community Sings Passing?," 25.

onto the screen during a medley of “mother” songs. While a gimmick like this could never have succeeded in a downtown house, it had a tremendous effect on patrons at the Harding.<sup>38</sup>

Each club meeting was structured around such business items as might appear on any agenda, although Meikel’s agenda was always “entertainingly presented.” For example, for “New Business” Meikel would introduce a tongue-in-cheek issue for his patrons to vote on, such as “Should dresses be longer or shorter?”<sup>39</sup> The membership voted by singing specially-written parodies on the topic at hand. Meikel also incorporated Logan Square happenings into the meetings whenever possible in order to enhance his ties with the community and remind patrons that the Harding was there to serve the neighborhood. This last issue was near and dear to Meikel, who wanted patrons to embrace the Harding as their personal social club. “I keep reminding the members,” he wrote in November 1927, “that the Harding theatre is *their* clubhouse, and that the ‘Organ Club’ is *their* club.” And that club had now reached a membership of 5,000 patrons.<sup>40</sup>

### *Organ Solos at the Harding*

Meikel may have initially won over his audience with the interactive and personalized Organ Club approach, but he sustained that loyal following on the basis of his skill as an organist and showman.<sup>41</sup> He offered excellent organ specialties that would have satisfied a singing audience anywhere, into which he integrated local touches and audience-request numbers. Meikel often abandoned the idea of a theme and simply

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38 “Organ Solos: Edward Meikels,” *Exhibitors Herald*, May 21, 1927, 40. Meikel’s name was often misspelled in the trade press, as it is here. Other common misspellings include Mickel and Mickels.

39 Meikel, “Community Sings Passing?,” 25.

40 Ibid., 25.

41 “Organ Solos: Edward Mickels,” *Exhibitors Herald*, April 2, 1927, 46.

led the patrons in singing favorite songs. He also employed standard community-singing strategies, like an on-stage thermometer that registered the volume of sound produced by the audience.<sup>42</sup> Some of his scripted solos, such as a “school-day” stunt from 1927, were found in singing houses everywhere.<sup>43</sup> However, Meikel’s most innovative and fascinating solos fell into two distinct categories: presentations that celebrated the Harding’s performers and staff members, and solos that incorporated the Harding’s patrons beyond the listing of names and the projection of photographs. We shall look at each of these in turn.

It was not unheard of for an organist to feature other performers in his solo. At the Oriental, for example, Henri Keates,<sup>44</sup> Preston Sellers,<sup>45</sup> and Milton Charles<sup>46</sup> all presented solos in honor of Paul Ash. These miniature celebrations served two purposes. First, they portrayed the Oriental performers and patrons as an affectionate family in order to promote community sentiment. Second, they boosted Ash, who was the theater’s headliner and therefore indirectly responsible for the success of all those affiliated with the Oriental. Meikel presented similar tributes at the Harding, such as his praise of the theater’s master of ceremonies, Mark Fisher (Figure 5.7). Meikel, however, explored new territory when he featured members of the theater staff who never appeared in the spotlight. Finally, Meikel promoted various Balaban & Katz stars, some of whom performed at the Harding and some of whom did not. It seems likely that these presentations were provided by B & K, although Meikel achieved excellent results with them.

Singer and master of ceremonies Mark Fisher had a successful career but was not a draw for the Harding like Ash was for the McVickers and the Oriental. Meikel was a

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42 “Harding,” *Variety*, August 18, 1926, 52.

43 “Organ Solos: Eddie Meikel,” *Exhibitors Herald*, October 15, 1927, 58.

44 “Organ Solos: Henri Keates,” *Exhibitors Herald World*, June 7, 1930, 104.

45 “Organ Solos: Preston Sellers,” *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, October 6, 1928, 52.

46 “Organ Solos: Milton Charles,” *Exhibitors Herald*, December 24, 1927, 69.



**Figure 5.7:** This photograph of Mark Fisher was published in an April 1927 issue of *Exhibitors Herald*. The caption described him as “the Chesterfield of bandshow leaders.” In addition to his career as a band leader and master of ceremonies—first with Lubliner & Trinz and later with Balaban & Katz—Fisher was also a celebrated banjo player.

much larger draw and therefore did not have the same relationship with Fisher that Keates and his associates had with Ash. Meikel featured Fisher in his organ solo on three occasions. In two cases Fisher had been absent for some time, so Meikel led his patrons in a communal welcome to celebrate the m.c.'s return. The other instance was a celebration of Fisher's first year, for which the Harding patrons sang the traditional "Happy Birthday" song that Meikel had composed for them.<sup>47</sup> To celebrate Fisher's return in July 1927 the club members sang a special version of "Hello, Aloha" that began, "Hello, Mark Fisher, We're Glad You're Back."<sup>48</sup> In January 1928 the solo was billed as "Welcome Mark" but consisted primarily of standard community-singing numbers. At the conclusion of the singing Meikel "requested his members to give Mark the usual club cheer," which they did with gusto.<sup>49</sup> It is not clear whether Fisher was present to receive these accolades on any occasion, but of course the celebration was really for the patrons, not for the m.c. When Meikel and his followers welcomed Fisher back to the theater they reaffirmed the notion that the Harding had become a family in which every member was important. The role of master of ceremonies was not just a position, and Fisher was not a mere employee. Instead, the patrons were inspired to feel a unique loyalty to Fisher and, by extension, to Meikel and the theater. This model—*theater-as-family*—was anything but uncommon, but Meikel carried the idea further than had any other performer. Of course, this model was appropriate only for neighborhood theaters, not their ornate, upscale competitors downtown.

In March 1928, Meikel presented an unusual solo in which he introduced his audience to "every man and woman in the employ of the theatre." This included ushers, receptionists, doormen, projectionists, and stagehands—all of the picture palace functionaries that usually remained nameless and even invisible. The presentation

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47 "Organ Solos: Eddie Meikel," *Exhibitors Herald*, October 15, 1927, 58.

48 "Organ Solos: Edward Meikel," *Exhibitors Herald*, July 2, 1927, 48.

49 "Organ Solos: Ed Meikel," *Exhibitors Herald*, January 21, 1928, 58.



featured a photograph of each employee, beside which was printed their position in the theater and “a clever little verse about them.”<sup>50</sup> These verses would have been accompanied by a familiar tune, and they may even have been sung out loud.

On other occasions, Meikel incorporated the staff into his solos not as featured characters but as bit players. In early 1927, Meikel cast his organ solo as an argument between himself and the motion-picture operators. The text of the argument, projected onto the screen, was set to the tune of various Irish songs. Comedy slides set to “Hello, Swanee, Hello” were interspersed throughout, and of course the program consisted primarily of community singing.<sup>51</sup> The contents of this argument have been lost, but the identity of the interlocutors is of great interest. In a downtown theater, patrons were encouraged to forget that motion-picture operators existed at all. To contemplate the film projector and the men who operated it was to tear down the traditional veil of illusion. Meikel, however, explicitly drew his patrons’ attention to the projection booth and its occupants, thereby furnishing his audience with a glimpse into the “family” affairs of Harding employees: real people who had lives outside the show—and bickered like anyone else.

In other solos, Meikel featured his own patrons. Community singing always meant that the audience was the focus, but Meikel often took audience boosting to a new level. The Organ Club format was the perfect venue in which to feature the audience, for club members already possessed a form of recognition (their memberships) and already contributed to organ-solo programming via weekly requests. Meikel took audience participation a step further by importing the atmosphere of a club meeting into his solos. Meikel’s patrons exercised an active presence in the organ solo, just as they would in the club room. Sometimes the patrons were featured as characters in the lantern-slide narrative. On such occasions their influence on the solo, although

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50 “Organ Solos: Eddie Meikel,” *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, March 3, 1928, 45.

51 “Organ Solos: Edward Mickels,” *Exhibitors Herald*, March 26, 1927, 35.

predetermined, took center stage. Sometimes the patrons were allowed an active voice and had the power to change the presentation's outcome. And other times, the community singing feature itself was exaggerated until the patrons became stars in that activity.

While Meikel's audience-boosting organ solos were neither original nor unique—many of his tactics were employed in the downtown palaces as well—three things in his approach stand out: the context of the Harding as a neighborhood house, the frequency with which Meikel featured his audience, and the changes that Meikel made to the content and delivery of his solos. The simplest way for any organist to flatter his audience members was to present fan letters on the screen. This procedure indicated that audience opinions were taken seriously and that patrons had real influence over the entertainment. At the same time, a fan-letter solo moved the spotlight onto the audience and even turned some lucky patrons into celebrities—at least for a few minutes. In truth, though, the “fan letters” were usually faked to suit the organist's design. It may be that the patrons were fully aware of this, especially in a few outrageous cases. Nonetheless, Meikel's club members were still pleased to be the focal point of the solo, even if their on-screen ambassadors were fictional.

The fan-letter solo was particularly popular, and it appeared in theaters across the country. In 1927, Bob West projected a fan letter at the Houston Metropolitan in which a young girl begged that West play a sad song so that the girl's sweetheart should take pity on her.<sup>52</sup> In 1930, Bill Meeder of the Richmond Hill RKO displayed a letter from a young man who wanted to know how to propose,<sup>53</sup> while the next year Russ Henderson of the Worcester Plymouth presented handwritten letters full of “the oddest requests and ‘lines’ this audience has ever seen.”<sup>54</sup> All of these letters, though, were obvious forgeries, designed to deliver humor or pathos and to introduce songs

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52 “Organ Solos: Bob West,” *Exhibitors Herald*, August 13, 1927, 40.

53 “Organ Solos: Bill Meeder,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, April 5, 1930, 51.

54 “Organ Solos: Russ Henderson,” *Motion Picture Herald*, May 9, 1931, 50.

already selected by the organist. In the case of Meikel and his Organ Club, most of the letters at least took on the appearance of being genuine. That club members did in fact make requests on a regular basis made the stunt all the more believable.

The trade press was less trusting of the fan-letter gimmick. In a *Herald* review from April 1927, we learn that Meikel projected onto the screen “an open letter supposedly written by one of his club members.”<sup>55</sup> The reviewer presumed that the letter was not genuine, and he was probably right. However, he did not offer any justification for his doubt, and it appears that the letter was in fact believable (unlike those used by Henderson). Later in the same year Meikel offered a “Request” solo which featured a series of fan letters, each of which introduced a community singing number. There is no indication that these letters weren’t genuine.<sup>56</sup> Whether or not they were is less important than how Meikel used such fan letters. Organists in other theaters used them to put across gags or frame the community singing. At the Harding, fan letters were an extension of the fleeting celebrity already granted to patrons who submitted requests. Meikel’s fan-letter solos featured the patrons, if only through a surrogate, and emphasized the spotlighted role of the club member.

Fan letters allowed patrons to control their entertainment, but only in a delayed and indirect manner. Vocalisms and other noises made during the performance could give the audience a direct influence on the course of events. The most basic manifestation of this power was applause, which audiences everywhere used to express their satisfaction and thereby assure the continuation of desired entertainment. (Negative counterparts to applause, such as boos and physical attacks, were nonexistent in picture palaces. At worst, an audience would respond with silence.) Every picture-palace audience was explicitly invited to contribute to the entertainment via applause, but organists who featured community singing often invited their patrons to contribute

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55 “Organ Solos: Edward Meikels,” *Exhibitors Herald*, April 23, 1927, 48.

56 “Organ Solos: Edward Meikel,” *Exhibitors Herald*, October 1, 1927, 41.

more actively.

In one common stunt, anything but unique to the Harding, the organist would invite his patrons to decide a question by means of vocal response. This opportunity to participate beyond the usual singing allowed an audience to express its feelings on an issue and, in some cases, actually determine the program. The “voting” element in a solo also encouraged more enthusiastic singing, since each patron was eager to voice his opinion. The sorts of questions put to the audience were often intended to have a single “right” answer, and the resulting agreement among the patrons reinforced their ties both to one another and to the theater. In 1930, for example, Fred Kinsley at the New York Hippodrome asked his patrons to express their opinions on Prohibition. He provided three songs—one for enforcement, one for reform, and one for repeal—and invited each patron to sing the song that corresponded with her position. To the surprise of no one, those in favor of repeal produced the loudest singing. The patrons were then rewarded with another chorus of the song that had represented the vote for repeal, “Happy Days Are Here Again.”<sup>57</sup>

Two of Meikel’s voting-style solos were reviewed in the trade press. Neither of these presentations was particularly original, but both were well-suited to the patronage and met with great success. Shortly after he created the Organ Club in 1926, Meikel offered a solo in which he asked the audience to help him decide whether to get married or not. Meikel provided specially-composed lyrics with which the patrons could cast a vote for or against. After the patrons had taken sides, Meikel projected a slide which read, “I will be married in October.” Then, as half of the audience burst into applause, he changed to a slide which read “1982.” This howl-inducing gag was followed by a short session of community singing, for which “so much good feeling had been worked up... that the choruses were practically shouted.”<sup>58</sup> In this

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57 “Organ Solos: Fred Kinsley,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, April 12, 1930, 67.

58 “The Organ Club,” *Variety*, August 25, 1926, 25.

solo, Meikel demonstrated the organist's power to encourage partisanship among his patrons, only to diffuse the tension with humor and reunite the disparate elements of his patronage with community singing. Patrons became invested in the presentation because they were asked to express an opinion, but this also created the possibility of division and discomfort. No-one wanted to be on the losing side. The introduction of a humorous punchline assured universal goodwill at the end, and each participant was able to hold onto his point of view without threatening the harmony within the theater community.<sup>59</sup>

One year after Meikel asked his patrons to vote on the subject of marriage, another important Chicago organist offered a very similar solo. Albert F. Brown, famous for his unique stage presentation solos, queried audiences about marriage at the Granada and Marbro theaters, two Marks Brothers houses located in the Rogers Park and Garfield Park neighborhoods respectively. The premise of Brown's solo was identical to that of Meikel's, but its execution followed quite a different path. While Brown's text did play on a cynical view of marriage, he steered clear of almost all humor and chose instead a serious conclusion: a "human-interest presentation" on the stage that featured a man, woman, and baby in a portrayal of domestic bliss.<sup>60</sup> This serious note suited Brown, who had made his name with the artistic and sentimental stage

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59 It appears that theater patrons everywhere tended to take a relaxed attitude toward voting solos. In 1932, Bob Demming of the Buffalo Century actually asked his audience to express their preference between the two presidential candidates, Roosevelt and Hoover. The songs were chosen for comical effect, and the result was a tie. Despite this political partisanship, which might have produced unpleasant sentiments, the patrons all joined together for a good-natured community-singing finale. Theatergoers were looking for lighthearted fun, not serious debate, and they were happy to ignore politics and personal philosophy while at the picture show. In addition, the organists who led community singing fostered such goodwill over time that their patrons were highly receptive to whatever entertainment lay in store ("Organ Solos: Bob Demming," *Motion Picture Herald*, October 29, 1932, 65).

60 Walter Hirsch, "Four Arrangements of Organ Solos," *Exhibitors Herald*, September 3, 1927, 18. Here is the complete text of Brown's solo, one of few reproduced in the trade press:

**TITLE—THE MARRIAGE RIDDLE (Burlesque).**

**(Play Mendelssohn's "Wedding March.")**

**Opening (the following to melody, "Marching Through Georgia"):**

productions that accompanied his organ solos.<sup>61</sup>

So far, we have observed that Meikel and his colleagues featured the names, photos, letters, requests, and opinions of their patrons. Their singing was featured as well, but only as a means to personal expression via “voting.” Sometimes, however, the singing of an individual patron was singled out for its quality or volume, and that patron was rewarded with special recognition from the organist and fellow audience members.

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Folks, I've got a problem that I wish you'd solve for me,  
For a year I've been keeping steady company,  
But I don't know just how happy I am going to be,  
If I go out and get married—

Oh gee—you see, I need your good advice,  
Do you believe that married life is nice?  
Please don't make a joke of this, but answer truthfully,  
Do you think that I should get married?

Looks like you are all afraid to tell me anything,  
But I heard when folks are happy that they always sing,  
So I'll flash a song and if I hear your voices ring  
I'll know that I should get married—

Before I start I warn you once again  
This song is for the happy married men  
So if you've not lived your married life successfully  
Don't sing the words of this chorus.

**(Insert chorus of popular song.)**

I thought all the happy married men would sing right out  
But there's no such animal I've learned without a doubt,  
If there's any HAPPY married WOMEN let them shout  
Loud as they can in this chorus.

**(Insert Chorus—“Always.”)**

That proves there's few happy married women—don't forget  
But I haven't hear from all you single people yet  
Those of you who wouldn't dare get married on a bet  
All join in on this chorus—

**(Insert chorus of popular song.)**

Now let's hear from both the married WOMEN and the MEN  
And the ones that wish that they were single once again  
and the SINGLE ones that wish that they were soon to wed  
All join in this chorus—

**(Insert chorus—“Russian Lullaby.”)**

**(The following to melody “Here Comes the Bride.”)**

By all advice, marriage is nice,  
If first you don't succeed, just try it over twice—  
Love dreams come true, I'll prove to you  
Don't say I'm wrong till you hear this sweet song—

**TITLE SLIDE—BABY FEET GO PIT'TER PAT'TER**

61 Will Whitmore, “Brown Tells ‘Herald’ Readers How to Use Scrimaphone,” *Exhibitors Herald*, August 6, 1927, 9.

For example, at the turn of the decade both Adolph Goebel of the Yonkers Loew's<sup>62</sup> and Preston Sellers of the Chicago Oriental<sup>63</sup> offered similar solos intended to seek out vocal talent for the newly emerging talkies. To conduct the search, an assistant moved up and down the aisles with a portable microphone and invited patrons to sing one at a time. The sound was projected through amplification horns hidden backstage. Sellers's audience "applauded enthusiastically" after each person had completed the test,<sup>64</sup> but Goebel found it necessary to minimize the embarrassment that some of his patrons experienced with a hearty round of community singing at the conclusion. In both cases, however, the solo was a great success.

The first time that Meikel singled out a patron for exceptional vocalizing he took the idea in quite a different direction, for the patron in question was in fact a song plugger, planted in the audience by Meikel. After Meikel called his plant up onto the stage he presented him with a "mammoth cigar" (proportioned so as to let the audience in on the joke) and then invited the plugger, Jack Perry, to sing a number.<sup>65</sup> Pluggers did not appear regularly in Meikel's solos; in fact, this early example was never duplicated. While there is no indication that the appearance of the plugger provoked a negative reaction, the club idea was inimical to outside performers, and Meikel began soon thereafter to focus on the relationship between himself and the patrons. Meikel developed a reputation for his avoidance of "out and out plugging"—quite the opposite of many other organists, even some so renowned as Jesse Crawford, who plugged songs ostentatiously at the Paramount.<sup>66</sup> A neighborhood organist like Meikel had to take care not to offend his audience. His patrons all lived locally and all attended on a weekly basis. Clearly, he concluded that if he annoyed his club members

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62 "Organ Solos: Adolph Goebel," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, December 7, 1929, 60.

63 "Organ Solos: Preston Sellers," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, September 20, 1930, 61.

64 *Ibid.*, 61.

65 "Harding," *Variety*, August 18, 1926, 52.

66 "Harding," *Variety*, November 9, 1927, 26.

with constant plugging, they would defect to another theater.

A year later Meikel featured the voices of his patrons in a more conventional manner, although the innovative details of the solo were unique to the Harding. Meikel informed his audience that during the community singing he would “auction off” sheet music to the loudest singers. Two ushers passed out music to members of the audience while he played, and at one point Meikel himself climbed onto the stage in order to throw rolled-up music into the balcony. It was not uncommon for Meikel to leave his console to encourage the audience in their vocalizing, a “cheer-leading” practice which was widely decried in the trade press. The solo was a smashing success and required an encore.<sup>67</sup> Although the patrons featured in Meikel’s solo were tangibly rewarded for their exuberance, none of them were actually invited to show off for their peers. In this sense Meikel’s auction solo was similar to the presentations in which he encouraged wholehearted participation. Just one month earlier, for example, Meikel had led a community singing session in which his console began to sink back into the orchestra pit whenever participation flagged.<sup>68</sup> This gimmick, used by many organists, kept the energy up and introduced an element of humor. The auction, organ lift, and thermometer gags all introduced a “reason” to sing and helped participants to overcome self-conscious tendencies.

One of Meikel’s audience-centered solos stands out as uniquely suited the neighborhood house. To celebrate the third anniversary of the theater, Meikel projected the name and birthday of every member of his organ club onto the screen. Then he led the club members in singing the official songs for the Rotarians, Lions, Kiwanis, and American Legion clubs, all organizations to which patrons belonged.<sup>69</sup> This program achieved a number of Meikel’s objectives as a neighborhood theater musician. First, the singing of club songs demonstrated that patrons were not only moviegoers but

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67 “Organ Solos: Edward Meikel,” *Exhibitors Herald*, August 27, 1927, 48.

68 “Organ Solos: Edward Meikel,” *Exhibitors Herald*, July 30, 1927, 34.

69 “Organ Solos: Eddie Meikel,” *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, November 3, 1928, 48.



active members of the Logan Square community as well. We have seen a number of examples in which organists humanized themselves or their fellow performers, but in this case Meikel humanized his patrons. He permitted each of them to transcend the role of entertaineer and to express deeply-held commitments within the context of the theater. Second, the singing of club songs spotlighted the idea of community organizations, which in turn validated the Organ Club as a legitimate body of civic-minded locals. Finally, in order to celebrate the theater, Meikel wisely chose to celebrate the community. Because the Harding, like all neighborhood theaters, relied on its ties to the community, any endorsement of that community could only strengthen the theater.

This style of presentation was probably commonplace in many other neighborhood theaters, even though no accounts of them exist in the trade press (few neighborhood theaters were reviewed at all). In any event, this solo would not have been appropriate for a downtown house. A downtown palace would have nothing to gain from the singing of club songs other than the pure entertainment value, which could be derived more easily from the playing of recent hits. In addition, downtown palaces sought to homogenize their audiences, the members of which came from varied backgrounds and social classes.<sup>70</sup> It was not in the exhibitor's interest for patrons to identify with clubs or other social organizations. In a neighborhood house the patrons had a great deal more in common, and could therefore express a greater degree of individuality without the threat of disharmony. Instead, the theater community thrived on personalized contributions in many different forms and on the notion that the theater itself had now become an important community center belonging to the neighborhood.

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<sup>70</sup> David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993): 226.

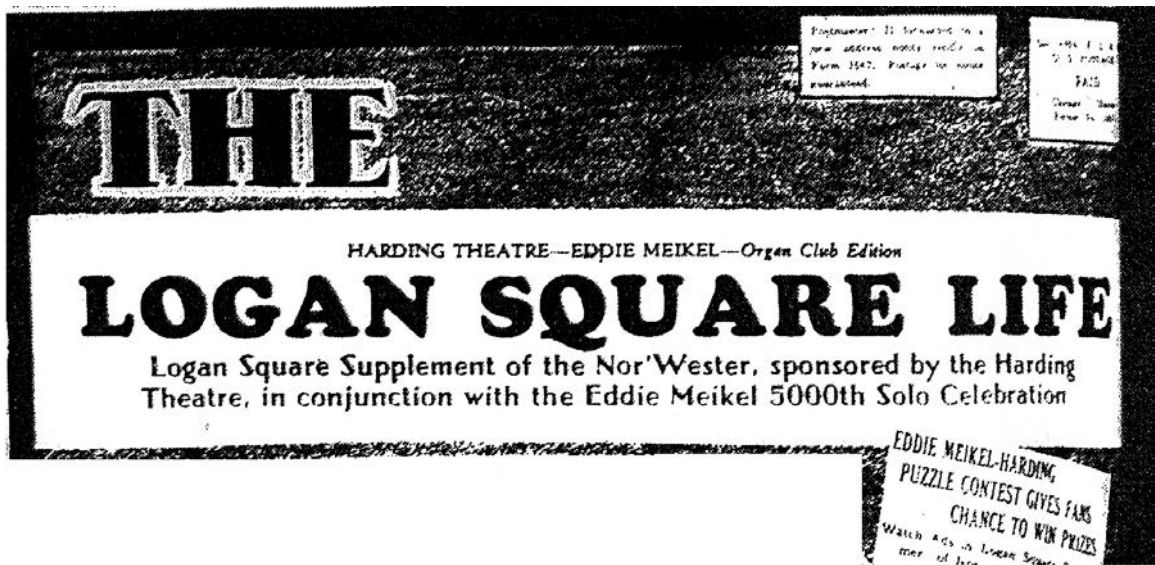
### *Meikel's 5,000th Performance*

This notion—that the Harding belonged to the residents and merchants of Logan Square—was never better expressed than on the occasion of Meikel's 5,000th performance at the Harding in November 1929. To celebrate his extraordinary success, local merchants came together to launch a newspaper-based exploitation scheme that would solidify Meikel's position as a community institution and boost their own enterprises in the process. The *Logan Square Life*, a community newspaper that enjoyed high circulation in the neighborhood, dedicated an entire issue to the celebration of Meikel's 5,000th performance (Figure 5.8).<sup>71</sup> A cover story featured Meikel's Organ Club and described the success and notoriety he had achieved with it over the years. The highlight of the issue was a series of congratulatory advertisements placed by local businesses, many of which included photographs of Meikel patronizing their neighborhood stores. In addition, a specially-commissioned drawing of Meikel was cut up and inserted into advertisements throughout the paper. The local merchants offered a prize to the reader who could best fit the pieces together.

This newspaper extravaganza, inspired by Meikel's contributions to the community, greatly benefitted all of those involved. In a single stroke, *Logan Square Life* generated goodwill among its readership, most of whom were enthusiastic members of the Organ Club, and increased advertising revenue due to the congratulatory notices inserted by local merchants. The merchants themselves also benefited by being associated with such a neighborhood favorite, as well as from their puzzle-piece promotion. The Harding received an enormous volume of free publicity of a kind far more effective than any paid advertisement. And, of course, Meikel himself basked in this "testimony to the friendship and esteem which he has merited for his faithful

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<sup>71</sup> "The Tribute An Organist Can Win," *Exhibitors Herald World*, November 25, 1929, 64.



**Figure 5.8:** In November 1929, *Exhibitors Herald* reproduced the front page of the *Logan Square Life* issue dedicated to Meikel and his Organ Club.

and completely successful work at the Harding.”<sup>72</sup>

This celebration of Meikel’s 5,000th performance bears witness to two important points about the Harding and its position as a neighborhood theater. First, it is an affirmation of Meikel’s enormous success with the Organ Club idea. Positive reviews and trade-press articles tell us a great deal about an organist’s reception and influence, but the fact that the Logan Square business community invested time and money into a promotion of Meikel is a solid affirmation of the organist’s effective performance style. In fact, the trade-press coverage of this event indicates that Meikel was primarily responsible for the Harding’s success. Second, the business community’s investment in their local organist demonstrates the unique position of a neighborhood theater. All of the Logan Square businesses, including the Harding, relied overwhelmingly on local patronage. The larger the volume of potential patrons who visited the neighborhood business district, the more successful all the businesses could be. By 1929 the Harding had become a significant boon to the other business, who could rely on their local theater to attract a steady flow of patrons to the area. It was therefore worthwhile for the entire business community to promote the success of its biggest draw. This prestigious position was hard-won, for the Harding initially had to prove its value to the community—both on a social and a commercial level—in order to succeed. Here we might recall the expensive street festival that celebrated the theater’s opening in 1925, an investment on the part of the Harding to ensure the goodwill of the Logan Square neighborhood. Only with persistence and the insightful, community-boosting contributions of Meikel could the Harding have achieved its enviable position in the local economy.

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72 W.S. Russell, “Merchants Boost Meikel Organ Club: Join Paper in Big Tribute to ‘Vet’ Organist: The 5,000th Performance at the Harding in Chicago Is Occasion for Tieup,” *Exhibitors Herald World*, November 25, 1929, 55-56.

### *The Spread of the Organ Club Idea*

In a 1928 article entitled “Organ Clubs Draw Good Patronage,” *Herald* commentator A. Raymond Gallo lamented that, despite the many advantages they afforded, “there are not many organ clubs.”<sup>73</sup> Gallo, who was in an excellent position to survey the field, was doubtless correct in his observation. At the same time, it seems that a few organists began to imitate Meikel’s Organ Club idea almost immediately. It is clear that he inspired imitators within the first year of his experiment and that these imitators generally met with a great deal of success.

Among the first to jump on this bandwagon was Clark Fiers of the West Side, a neighborhood theater in Scranton, PA. In early 1927 Fiers published an article in which he offered advice on how to conduct community singing. Among his recommended tactics was the “community singing school,” an organized approach to singing during the exhibition program that was clearly based on Meikel’s club.<sup>74</sup> Fiers had recently started his own “West Side Singing School,” an effort that he expected to pay off in the near future even though his patrons weren’t “singing so loudly and lustily yet.”<sup>75</sup> Although Fiers does not mention Meikel by name, he does pay him an obvious tribute: “One familiar Chicago organist has every audience at his feet, literally, and how they sing with him.”<sup>76</sup> Any *Herald* reader would have immediately recognized Meikel as the originator of the club idea, and this description of his success rings true with other published accounts.

One year later the Organ Club idea returned to Chicago, when Chauncey Haines of the B&K Norshore inaugurated his own club for patrons drawn from the Evanston and Rogers Park neighborhoods. Via slide, Haines invited patrons to become official

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73 A. Raymond Gallo, “Organ Clubs Draw Good Patronage,” *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, June 2, 1928, 115.

74 Clark Fiers, “Playing the Organ Solo,” *Exhibitors Herald*, February 19, 1927, 30.

75 *Ibid.*, 30.

76 *Ibid.*, 30.

members of his new organ club and to submit requests each week. He then proceeded to demonstrate the importance of community spirit to the neighborhood theater by conducting a singing contest between the two neighborhoods represented by the Norshore patronage. This good-natured exhibition of community spirit resulted in an encore and much good cheer.<sup>77</sup> Contests were a staple in all singing houses, but only a neighborhood theater could reliably assign teams based on local residence instead of, say, by gender or hair color. Neighborhood loyalty doubtless inspired the patrons to greater effort as well.

The Organ Club idea took root not only in neighborhood theaters but also in small-town theaters. Exhibitors in both of these situations faced the same problems and opportunities, since they each catered to a local population. Few small-town organists were granted coverage by the trade press, but in 1928 Charles Kusserow was acknowledged for his success with an organ club. Kusserow was the organist at the Adler theater in Marshfield, Wisconsin, a rural town located some distance from any major city center. Kusserow's strategy was to mail a letter to every patron of the theater in which he invited the recipient to fill out the attached membership card and join his organ club. Kusserow named his club the "I Scream Club" so as to clearly indicate its primary function: community singing.<sup>78</sup> Another small-town organ club cropped up in Lockport, NY, at the Palace theater. Here, organist E.B. Davis adopted the slogan "All for Fun and Fun for All" to characterize his organization.<sup>79</sup>

In later years the organ club became a lifeline for console artists who struggled to retain a theater post. The introduction of film sound threatened theater musicians everywhere, and those in neighborhood and small-town houses were the first to go. In 1929, Paul H. Forster, organist at the Syracuse Eckel, developed a Meikel-style organ club in order to prove his value to the management. Eckel's club revolved around

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77 "Organ Solos: Chauncey Haines," *Exhibitors Herald*, March 17, 1928, 38.

78 Gallo, "Organ Clubs Draw Good Patronage," 115.

79 "E.B. Davis Likes Our Slogan For His Organ Club," *Motion Picture News*, October 26, 1929, 40.

audience requests. To facilitate these, he installed in the lobby a box of request cards on which a patron might write her request, name, and address. An average of 4,000 requests were submitted each week. Forster would then choose which numbers he wished to play and decide in which week each number would be performed. Once a schedule had been drawn up, Forster would send to each patron who had successfully submitted a request a printed card that read: "Dear Patron: I thank you for your request. .... will be played for you in my Novelty during the week of ..... I hope you will be here to sing with the Organ. Cordially yours, Paul H. Forster, Organist."<sup>80</sup> Forster would then project the names of every patron whose request was to be played at the beginning of the organ solo, at which point those patrons became official members of the Eckel Organ Club. As the idea developed, the community newspaper provided assistance by printing regular notices about it. The management observed that the box office receipts were up, since every patron who had a request accepted was sure to attend the theater during the week in question. It was in this way that Forster was able to secure his position for quite some time.<sup>81</sup>

While a Meikel-style Organ Club never found a home in the downtown theaters, some of the flagship houses did develop other types of organizations with which to secure the local patronage. This is not surprising, for, like neighborhood theaters, downtown houses primarily attracted locals, and the locals responded well to community tie-ins at the picture show. However, these palaces also catered to itinerant audiences, and for this reason could not tailor their shows to suit the locals exclusively. The introduction of a once-weekly club was an excellent solution to this dilemma. Club membership gave the locals a sense of community and belonging, while limited meetings prevented the alienation of visitors. These clubs could also be used to attract a specialized audience during the slowest part of the week.

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<sup>80</sup> "A Good Idea," *The American Organist* 12, no. 9 (September 1929): 558.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 557-8.

One such club was developed under band leader Paul Ash at the McVickers in 1925—even before Meikel established his Organ Club at the Harding<sup>82</sup>—and the idea (along with the members) moved with him to the Oriental in 1926. In the 1920s, regulations prohibited picture-palace stage shows on Sunday mornings. This legislation eliminated the biggest appeal of houses like the McVickers and Oriental, and almost eradicated interest in the show. The “Paul Ash Sunday Morning Club” sought to mitigate both of these problems by using local talent instead, a solution which provided stage entertainment, attracted a loyal patronage, and appealed to the community spirit of the locals. The primary objective of the club was to supply between ten and fifteen acts for the Sunday morning picture show. The club, however, also took on a striking social dimension. Officers were elected from the body of members and the club met regularly outside of the picture show, “sometimes after the theatre in the rehearsal halls, or at the homes of some of the members, who arrange get-together parties and little social affairs for dances and so forth.”<sup>83</sup> The appearance of locals onstage also attracted unprecedented crowds to the Sunday morning show, when all 2,500 of the Oriental’s club members regularly appeared. Such a club provided a sense of community and intimacy to the middle-class locals, who might otherwise have felt lost in the cavernous auditorium of this busy itinerant theater. The columnist noted that this idea, like that of the organ club, spread quickly among downtown theaters. He observed that it was not appropriate for the neighborhood house, presumably because smaller theaters could not draw enough business on Sunday morning to justify the cost of operation.<sup>84</sup>

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82 No one theater performer had a monopoly on the general concept of the club. Instead, because clubs were popular outside of the theater, exhibitors and performers incorporated the idea into film presentation as they saw fit.

83 “Sunday Club Proves Draw at Oriental,” *Exhibitors Herald*, August 20, 1927, 33.

84 *Ibid.*, 34.



### *Epilogue: A Word from Meikel*

Eddie Meikel was not only a successful organist and community-sing leader: he was also a vociferous defender of community singing in the trade press. His arguments were well-considered and forcefully delivered, and his was perhaps the most aggressive voice in favor of the practice. However, his support of community singing as a commercial practice, designed to entertain the patrons and build box office revenue, did not reflect his personal sentiments. In fact, he persistently reminded the trade-press readers that he anticipated the day when community singing would lose popularity and he could tackle more “legitimate” presentations.<sup>85</sup> Thus, from 1927: “I don’t really believe there is an organist today playing community sings, who would not prefer to do something along more legitimate lines. Personally, I have an idea for solos that I am ready to spring as soon as I am convinced my audience is tired of the sings... I am constantly on the alert looking for the handwriting on the wall.”<sup>86</sup> Unfortunately, it doesn’t appear that Meikel ever had the opportunity to offer his new idea to the public. After 1929 the Harding was no longer mentioned in trade-press reviews, probably because the theater had ceased to offer live entertainment. Most neighborhood houses dismissed their organists in response to talking pictures and the effects of the Depression. All organ entertainmant had been removed from the Harding by April 1931 at the latest.<sup>87</sup> By June of that year, the Oriental was the only Chicago theater to employ a full-time organist.<sup>88</sup> Meikel himself made occasional appearances at the console of the Oriental as late as August 1932, but always as a community-singing leader.<sup>89</sup> His work was not reviewed in the trade press after that date.

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<sup>85</sup> Meikel, “Community Sings Passing?,” 25.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>87</sup> “18 Organists Dismissed by B & K,” *Variety*, April 22, 1931, 29.

<sup>88</sup> “5 Organists Left!,” *Variety*, June 16, 1931, 57.

<sup>89</sup> “Oriental, Chicago,” *Variety*, August 30, 1932, 37.

## Children's Matinees

### *Introduction*

Apart from the neighborhood exhibitor, there was one other type of exhibitor who relied upon community support. This was the woman who staged children's matinees in the mid-1920s. Like the neighborhood theater, the children's matinee could only survive with a committed local patronage and community support. In the case of the children's matinee, however, the patronage was supplied by local children, while the support needed to come from their parents and other concerned community members. In order to survive, matinee exhibitors had to convince community interest groups, such as the Parent Teacher Association, that children's matinees were wholesome and educational. The organist for a children's matinee, therefore, had to function on two levels simultaneously: she had to entertain the children who appeared at the theater and assuage the moral concerns of parents and reformers. These requirements echo the dual concerns of the neighborhood organist: to provide first-rate entertainment and to ensure long-term local patronage.

The children's matinee was a complete picture show presented each Saturday, when children were free from school and church. Like the regular shows, these matinees featured a combination of films and stage entertainment, all of which had been designated suitable for a young audience. Unlike the regular shows, children's matinees were more ideological than commercial. They highlighted moral uprightness, educational values, and civic responsibility, and they were designed to cultivate local favor for the theater. Managers also invited extensive community involvement in order to secure local support.

Children's matinees relied upon carefully-programmed music, but the community-singing experience offered to children in the matinee was quite different from that which theater patrons engaged in during the organ solo. While an organist was

sometimes present to provide music, the children's matinee usually relied upon a songleader to direct the singing from the stage. In this sense, the matinees featured a form of community singing more closely aligned with the civic-minded community singing that took place outside of the theater than with the organist-led singing that appeared in most theatrical programs.

Children's matinees provided a unique opportunity for women to take leadership roles in the planning and staging of picture shows. Women were offered few opportunities in the motion picture exhibition industry, and more often than not they were confined to managing ticket sales at the box office.<sup>90</sup> Because children's matinees required the approval of local mothers and members of the Parent Teacher Association, female community figures were invited to assist with the matinees and to keep a watchful eye over the program contents. Women also monopolized the trade-press discussion of entertainment for children. They published frequently on the topic of children's matinees, and exhibitors willingly yielded to their authority.

A great deal of ink was spilled over children's matinees—not out of concern for children but rather for the picture industry. Film exhibition itself was in a state of flux and controversy in the mid-1920s, and exhibitors were searching for a way to redeem their trade. In 1922 William H. Hays became President of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, a fledgling organization intended to clean up the motion-picture industry. A major scandal the year before, in which Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle was accused of raping and murdering a young actress, had tarnished the reputation of the exhibitors and producers, and three industry giants created the MPPDA in order to restore their public image.<sup>91</sup> In reality, the scandal had nothing to do with the pictures exhibited in theaters, and Arbuckle himself was acquitted with

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90 Ina Rae Hark, "The 'Theater Man' and 'The Girl in the Box Office': Gender in the Discourse of Motion Picture Theatre Management," *Film History* 6.2 (Summer 1994), 178-187.

91 The three producer-exhibitors who joined together to create the MPPDA were Famous Players-Lasky, Metro-Goldwyn, and First National.

a written apology from the court. All the same, the incident distressed a faction of conservative citizens who were concerned about motion-picture entertainment, and religious groups began to call for federal censorship of the movies. The efforts of the MPPDA during the 1920s culminated in the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, a tool for moral censorship known popularly as the Hays Code. While the MPPDA monitored all motion pictures, those intended for children came under especially close scrutiny. The Hays administration also concerned itself with the exhibition of films for children. The MPPDA sought both to clean up the image of the motion-picture industry and to appease the public.<sup>92</sup> The children's matinee was the perfect venue for this work, for it allowed the motion picture industry "to create good-will with the vast army of parents throughout the country whose chief duty is to protect the influences surrounding their children."<sup>93</sup>

Children's matinees were not expected to turn a profit.<sup>94</sup> The aims of the matinee far outstripped mere box office receipts. In 1925 Harold B. Franklin, General Manager for Paramount, encouraged exhibitors to consider the value of children's matinees "not in dollars and cents but in the far-reaching goodwill they create."<sup>95</sup> Franklin expected the children's matinee to yield a number of benefits. First, children would develop a moviegoing habit that would last into adulthood and ensure the future success of the industry. Second, children would spread the love of movies to their parents, who would in turn become supporters and patrons. Third, the matinee would establish the theater as a community institution and thereby quell moral

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92 Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 203-8.

93 "Children's Matinees, Builders of Good-Will in the Community," *The Film Daily*, March 15, 1925, 16.

94 The matinee was meant to build goodwill, not profits. In the case of the U.C. theater in Berkeley, for example, the profits were handed over to "some worthy charitable organization," which was chosen by a committee of PTA members. In this way, the U.C. theater guaranteed the allegiance of the Berkeley PTA and the goodwill of the entire community ("Morning Matinee Plan," *Motion Picture News*, July 18, 1925, 311).

95 Harold B. Franklin, "A Good-Will Creator," *The Film Daily*, March 15, 1925, 16.

objections to the film industry. Finally, children's matinees would forestall any move toward widespread censorship of films. Franklin hoped that exhibitors could stave off MPPDA interference if they voluntarily segregated and monitored films that were shown to children. (He also predicted the additional benefit that children would develop a better taste in films than that of their parents and would thereby encourage the long-term improvement of the industry.<sup>96</sup>) Franklin's efforts may have delayed the imposition of censorship, but the children's matinee failed on this count. Beginning in 1934, the Hays Code was heavily enforced across the film industry.<sup>97</sup>

### *The Crandall Chain in Washington, DC*

In 1925, the editor of *Film Daily* put up the Crandall chain of theaters in Washington, DC, as "one of the outstanding examples of exactly what can be accomplished" in the line of children's matinees.<sup>98</sup> The Crandall chain's matinee would remain a model for all children's matinees throughout the 1920s. These matinees were overseen by the chain's Public Service and Educational Department, which was established a few months after the MPPDA itself. The head of the department, Mrs. Harriet Hawley Locher, participated in national "Better Films Committees" with other women and was a noted speaker on the topic of children's matinees (Figure 5.9).<sup>99</sup>

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96 Ibid., 16, 50.

97 Christopher P. Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 37-8.

98 "Children's Matinees, Builders of Good-Will in the Community," 16. The spelling "Lorcher" is found in this source.

99 By the time she helped Crandall to develop a Children's matinee, Locher had already been at the forefront of children's motion picture reform for most of a decade. As Chairman of the Motion Picture Department of the District of Columbia Federation of Women's Clubs, her mission was described as follows: "Mrs Locher is seeking better pictures for Washington children supervised attendance with chaperonage at the picture theatres moving pictures on the playgrounds and instead of the vulgar sensational sensual and tragic she would have the films give forth the best of the human emotions rouse the dormant fires of loyalty and patriotism stir up the lofty ideals of honor and justice and withal let them give forth wholesome fun and humor to dissipate the tug of pathos and the gloom of horror and depression which some of the blood curdling exhibitions on the screen leave in their wake" (Edna Mary Colman, "The War Service of the Federation of



**Figure 5.9:** Mrs. Harriet Hawley Locher, as pictured in the July 1917 edition of *The Social Service Review*.

Mrs. Locher claimed that the Crandall matinees were the first to become a regular feature, although it appears that Paramount had offered a children's matinee as early as 1921.<sup>100</sup> The Crandall series itself was inaugurated on October 11, 1924. These Saturday matinees began at 10:15 am with an organ recital, "bright and pleasing without jazz."<sup>101</sup> The program was introduced at 10:30 with a bugle call, after which all of the Boy and Girl Scouts processed onto the stage while the organist played a lively march. Mrs. Locher invited children's organizations to become involved in order to secure local support. This move also allowed Mrs. Locher to classify her children's matinee as an activity comparable to the Scouts. Next in the program came the only trace of community singing: one verse of "America," under the direction of a song leader.<sup>102</sup> This was followed by another participatory act, the Scouts' pledge to the flag said by all. The remainder of the program was usually filled up with films (although a popular story teller replaced two of the reels for some time).<sup>103</sup>

Under Mrs. Locher, community singing did not play a large role in the children's matinee. This, however, was soon to change. Organist Irene Juno was responsible for a series of musical experiments and developments that took place in the Crandall chain children's matinees during 1927 (Figure 5.10). Juno published extensively on her

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Women's Clubs of the District of Columbia, as Directed by Mrs. Court F. Wood," *Social Service Review*, 5.6 (July 1917), 12).

100 Franklin, "A Good-Will Creator," 16.

101 The U.C. theater in Berkeley also banished jazz from its children's matinees, which were contemporaneous with those run by Mrs. Locher. At that theater, "no element of jazz is allowed to creep into any part of the program." This was a mandate of the "mothers and educators" who controlled the show, and reflected the culturally conservative values of those who protected young minds in the 1920s ("Morning Matinee Plan," 311).

102 Children's matinees often relied on song leaders. The U.C. theater in Berkeley featured a song leader known as "Big Brother," who also spoke directly to the youngsters in an informal manner ("Morning Matinee Plan," 311).

103 "Children's Matinees, Builders of Good-Will in the Community," 16. In Berkeley, the PTA demanded "that only such films be run as are educational and produce the proper emotional reaction; preferably films that send the youngsters home with new ideas and thoughts." Regular selections included historical films, such as Yale University's *Chronicles of America*; educational animal films, which were a favorite with the children; and the occasional story film, "when the subject is suitable for children" ("Morning Matinee Plan," 311).



**Figure 5.10:** This photograph of Irene Juno was published in *Exhibitors Herald* in September 1927. She was well-known to *Herald* readers as a columnist: she not only wrote extended articles about children's matinees but also published a regular column entitled "New Songs Reviewed by Irene Juno".



work in the *Herald*, and she served as a model for other organists in her position. Juno also reminds us that children's matinees offered a unique opportunity for women to become prominent in the film-exhibition industry. Indeed, Crandall assigned Juno to her post as matinee organist precisely because of her sex: her peers generally considered a woman to have a natural authority on the topic of children's entertainment. (Juno was one of few women invited to contribute to a national trade journal.) She also worked as a community liaison for the matinees and was required by her post to interact with local reformers—tasks that would not fall to a mainstream organist.

At the Crandall theaters, Juno sought to discover what impact music had on children and how music could be used to improve their experience and to better satisfy the requirements of reformers. Juno and Locher joined forces with Gladys Mills, the supervisor for the matinees, in order to informally study the childrens' responses to music during the show. The results of their investigation were conclusive: "We found out that musical reaction with children was 100 percent."<sup>104</sup> By this, Juno meant that the children were highly sensitive to the music they heard during the film and quick to associate a tune with a situation.

Juno used this knowledge to "censor" distressing scenes that were integral to the plots of films and could not be cut out. For example, she distracted her patrons from an all-too-realistic fight scene by interpolating popular numbers that the children knew. This "started them singing and whistling,"<sup>105</sup> and it was duly noted that not one child had to be carried from the theater in hysterics. (This had happened once it seems, when a guest organist failed to dampen the terror of a gruesome scene with music.<sup>106</sup>) On this occasion, Juno had invited a group of skeptical community members to attend the show and watch the children's reaction. By her account, "they all threw up their hands" in amazement at what they had witnessed. "Well," said

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<sup>104</sup> Irene Juno, "Music for Children's Shows," *Exhibitors Herald*, March 19, 1927, 13.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 50.

one witness, “I guess you women without any children know more about them than some of the mothers.”<sup>107</sup> Juno was convinced that she had proven that the singing of popular tunes was more powerful than the image on the screen.

Juno also observed that children could not be kept from singing during the film when the mood took them. As a result, she encouraged this tendency and offered a session of community singing from 10 to 10:30. Juno remarks that the children “like something with rhythm,” and we can see from her sample song list that musical guidelines for children’s matinees had become less stringent (although the songs tended to be old and hardly constituted “jazz”).<sup>108</sup> Juno also accepted on-the-fly requests from her patrons, who left their seats and crowded around the organ console during the singing. The lyrics of programmed songs were projected via slide. Children sang during other parts of the show as well. In one reported incident, a child cried out “There goes Barney Google” in response to a scene in the film. Juno began to play “Barney Google” on the spot, and all of the children sang. She also noted that “Show Me the Way to Go Home” had become indelibly connected in the minds of the children with any drunkard who appeared on screen. Hoping to eradicate this association, she refrained from playing the song. But the children sang it anyway, and she was forced to find the key and provide an accompaniment. Juno noted that such impromptu interpolations “would have been unbelievable in correct scoring of the picture, but there were no musical critics in the house, and what is more to the point, no one would have cared if there had been.”<sup>109</sup>

The official period of community singing and the impromptu instances just described were not the only occasions for singing in one of Juno’s matinees. Each

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>108</sup> In her article, Juno mentions the songs that were “most popular” with her patrons in 1927: Bye Bye Blackbird, For My Sweetheart, Collegiate, Show Me the Way to Go Home, Mary Lou, Barney Google, California, Here I Come, Glory Hallelujah, Over There, Keep the Home Fires Burning, and (for one young boy in particular) Sweet Adeline (Ibid., 13).

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 13.

show still opened with the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and Campfire Girls marching up the aisles—now always accompanied by Sousa’s “The Stars and Stripes Forever”—and this procession was still followed by one verse of “America,” led by Gladys Mills. Civic-minded children also had opportunities to contribute to the matinee that extended beyond participation in the weekly procession. A selected Boy Scout, for instance, was assigned to monitor each exit door from the moment the house opened, and he remained “on guard” until the last child had left. Civic-minded adults were incorporated into the show as well. Prominent club women, (female) teachers, and (female) members of the Parent Teacher Association acted as hostesses each week.<sup>110</sup>

### *Fox’s Matinee Programs*

In 1930, *Motion Picture News* ran a series of suggested programs for children’s matinees. This series was a late response to the popularity of matinees, and it appears that exhibitors were already losing interest in the medium. All the same, the *MPN* series encapsulates the philosophy and contents of children’s matinee programming, and it describes real shows that were being staged in Fox theaters. The Fox programs were devised by Ryllis Hemington, director of public relations for Fox West Coast Theatres, and they were intended to help theaters avoid common pitfalls in their quest to cultivate goodwill with a children’s show. Community singing was becoming an increasingly important element of the children’s matinee, and Hemington herself noted that the practice “should be encouraged at all children’s performances to build goodwill for neighborhood theatres.”<sup>111</sup>

The children’s matinee had the potential to generate much-desired goodwill in the community, but it was also dangerous ground for many exhibitors. If the children’s

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110 Ibid., 50. Community singing was also used to control the childrens’ behavior. As one exhibitor noted, “After the community singing the kiddies give undivided attention to the program” (“Recess for Songs Found Aid at Children’s Matinees,” *Motion Picture News*, December 11, 1926, 2272).

111 “Push Group Singing Is Wesco Tip,” *Motion Picture News*, November 22, 1930, 56.

matinee happened to produce controversy or outrage instead of support, it became a serious liability. The *News* noted the challenge of staging these matinees: “Always a ticklish problem, particularly where women’s clubs are concerned, the showing of pictures to child audiences must be done only under the most favorable conditions.”<sup>112</sup> For this reason, the *News* provided complete program recommendations, including feature films, short subjects, guests of honor, lecturers, displays, contests, community tie-ins, and any number of other appropriate program elements. Each of the programs was organized around a historical personage or event that was suitable for the Saturday in question, and they all emphasized educational elements.

Community singing did not appear in every recommended program, but it did constitute a regular presence, and it was to be found in two different forms. First, the *News* regularly suggested that a local music teacher or glee club be brought in to lead the singing of a suitable number. To celebrate the birthday of Theodore Roosevelt, the *News* recommended a selection of navy songs.<sup>113</sup> To celebrate Lincoln’s Address at Gettysburg, “Tenting Tonight on the Old Camp Ground” and “Marching Through Georgia” were selected.<sup>114</sup> The *News* also suggested that from time to time a chorus of children perform onstage under the direction of their teacher. This sort of performance was related to community singing and required a large degree of participation, but implied rehearsal and performance standards that would not otherwise exist. To celebrate the birthday of Robert Louis Stevenson, for example, the *News* suggested that a children’s chorus perform some of his poems set to music, while the occasion of “Indian Summer” evoked a call for “autumn songs.”<sup>115</sup>

Hemington recommended community singing frequently, but just as often she suggested that exhibitors program an alternative variety of sung participation: the

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<sup>112</sup> “Suggested Programs for Saturday Kiddie Shows,” *Motion Picture News*, October 4, 1930, 97.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 97, 99.

<sup>114</sup> “Suggested Programs for Saturday Kiddie Shows,” *Motion Picture News*, November 1, 1930, 105.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

sing-along film. All of the films listed by Hemington were either silent *Ko-Ko Song Car-Tunes*, released by Red Seal in the mid-1920s,<sup>116</sup> or the newer *Screen Songs*, released by Paramount with soundtracks.<sup>117</sup> Both series were created by the Fleischer brothers in their New York studio, and their presence on Hemington's lists attests to the enormous popularity of sing-along films by the beginning of the 1930s.

By 1931, community singing was not always a sideline element tacked onto the children's matinee. In some cases it was a central feature. By this time, Depression-stricken exhibitors were more concerned with filling the seats than with appeasing reformers. With only the commercial possibilities in mind, Warner Brothers conducted children's matinees in about 45 theaters located in and around Pittsburgh. These shows provided employment for out-of-work theater organists, who accompanied the singing and acted as masters of ceremony. *Variety* reported that these Warner Brothers matinees "are staged with the express intention of bringing the kids to the theatre through community singing."<sup>118</sup> The Depression transformed the entire film exhibition industry—even theater design was reconceived—and put most theater musicians permanently out of work. The effects of the Depression on mainstream organists will be our topic in the final chapter.

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<sup>116</sup> "Push Group Singing Is Wesco Tip," 57.

<sup>117</sup> "Suggested Programs for Saturday Kiddie Shows," *Motion Picture News*, October 4, 1930, 99.

<sup>118</sup> "Organists' Part Time for WB Kid Matinees," *Variety*, May 27, 1931, 63.

## CHAPTER 6

# THE ADVENT OF SOUND

**I**T IS TRADITIONAL for film-history narratives to credit *The Jazz Singer*, which premiered on October 6, 1927, with popularizing sound technology and prompting the industry-wide conversion to sound. This, of course, is an oversimplification of the process through which sound film emerged. Sound technology—a collection of competing innovations developed over a decade—faced the challenges of monopolistic distribution practices, limited equipment availability, and deep-rooted industry prejudices. Even after it had become clear that sound was the future of film production, silent and sound films coexisted for years while theaters were slowly wired by Western Electric.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the enormous revenues reported for *The Jazz Singer*, which even in its own time was heralded as an epoch-bringer, were secured primarily by the silent version of the film.<sup>2</sup>

While *The Jazz Singer* did not independently bring about the sound revolution, it provides an excellent case study for the development—practical, social, and economical—of sound technology. The film was produced by Warner Brothers, a struggling production company that was willing to take risks in order to survive in the competitive film market. Warner Brothers, a “minor” in the industry, did not control large chains of theaters and therefore did not have a guaranteed outlet for its prod-

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1 Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915–1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 90.

2 Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926–1931* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 111.

uct. In the late 1920s the production of sound films was indeed a risk—one that the profitable “majors” were not willing to take. At the same time, it was not a new idea. Various producers had been experimenting with sound technology since 1924, when Max Fleischer released sound versions of his *Song Car-Tune* shorts using Lee DeForest’s Phonofilm process (although these films were exhibited with sound in only a few Manhattan theaters).<sup>3</sup> In 1927, Fox, another “minor,” began to produce sound newsreels.<sup>4</sup> The film industry, however, considered sound to be a passing curiosity. Thomas Edison himself was not convinced that sound technology would have a lasting impact. In 1927, “Film Daily” quoted the skeptical film pioneer: “Yes, there will be a novelty to it for a little while, but the glitter will soon wear off and the movie fans will cry for silence or a little orchestra music.”<sup>5</sup>

During the late 1920s, Warner Brothers found a niche producing sound shorts. The films were released under the name Vitaphone, and theaters that wished to exhibit the films had to install the proprietary Western Electric Projector System. The Western Electric system was employed to replace live musical acts—and for nothing else. Warner Brothers boasted that their Vitaphone films would bring big-name performers into small theaters that could not afford the best in live entertainment. At first, Warner Brothers had no plans to expand into the production of sound features. Although their musical shorts were successful, most industry professionals agreed that sound technology should be employed only for the reproduction of music, not dialogue.

In 1927, however, Warner Brothers embarked upon a new kind of project: a feature film that would itself be silent, but that would tie together a series of musical performances recorded for the Western Electric system. Early advertisements for *The*

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3 Richard Fleischer, *Out of the Inkwell: Max Fleischer and the Animation Revolution* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 43.

4 Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 220.

5 “Five Companies in Pool Seek Deal For Use of Photophone,” *Film Daily*, March 4, 1927, 1-2.

*Jazz Singer*, which was to star George Jessel, emphasized the film's novel use of sound technology. After a contract dispute, Jessel was replaced by Al Jolson, one of Warner Brothers' most successful Vitaphone acts.<sup>6</sup> *The Jazz Singer* was followed by another highly successful Jolson vehicle, *The Singing Fool* (premiered September 20, 1928).<sup>7</sup> By this point, the Big Five producers could no longer ignore the impending domination of sound technology. Warner Brothers had demonstrated that sound was more than a passing fad, and the industry responded by equipping all production studios—and eventually theaters—to handle sound technology.<sup>8</sup>

## Sound and the Theater Musician

It is easy to imagine the impact of sound technology on theater musicians: as theaters were wired, the musicians—no longer needed to accompany the films—were dismissed. In the long run, this is exactly what happened. The specific course of events in the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, was more complicated.

In the early days of the sound era, the American Federation of Musicians was not willing to allow tens of thousands of jobs to disappear without a fight. By the late 1920s the film exhibition industry was the top employer of musicians. Theater orchestras provided jobs for more players than all other orchestras combined, while organists were leaving church positions to take lucrative picture-palace posts.<sup>9</sup> By the summer of 1928 the AFM was fighting on all fronts to preserve jobs for its members. The union's biggest stand took place in Chicago at the end of the summer.<sup>10</sup> Its efforts

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6 Crafton, *The Talkies*, 101-9.

7 Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 219.

8 Ibid., 221.

9 In some cases, organists were not able to return to their church jobs after the theaters were wired. Motion picture work was considered to have corrupted them ("Moral?," *Variety*, December 11, 1929, 74).

10 "Musicians Open Key Fight on Talkers in Chi; 750 Walk Out; Mgrs. Serve Injunction on Union," *Variety*, September 5, 1928, 16; "Chi Musicians' Walk-Out Strike Settled on Compromise Basis; Minimum of Four Met in Pit," *Variety*, September 12, 1928, 11.



were doomed, however, and the coming year saw evaporating jobs and dwindling salaries.<sup>11</sup>

The AFM failed to keep live music in the theaters, but—at least for a time—public opinion succeeded.<sup>12</sup> Theater operators were much more concerned about the demands of their patrons than those of union bosses, and the influence of picture audiences can be seen in a wave of rehiring at the turn of the decade. Audiences certainly enjoyed talking pictures, but they were dissatisfied with the impersonal character that wired theaters had assumed. They missed the human touch—like that which was featured at the Oriental theater in Chicago, where Paul Ash and his jovial repartee had been the number-one attraction. Patrons still wanted to make personal connections like this in the picture theater, and they were not yet ready to give up that element of motion-picture entertainment.

For this reason, the predictable trade-press headlines about dismissals, which first appeared in the summer of 1928,<sup>13</sup> were soon joined by headlines proclaiming the return of musicians to the theaters.<sup>14</sup> Paramount Publix took the lead in reinstating organists and expanding the use of organ music in its theaters. Only months after fighting with the musicians' local in Dallas over the dismissal of organists in late 1929,<sup>15</sup> Paramount Publix reversed its policy and installed fifteen Wurlitzers into the-

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11 Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 225.

12 The unions did not save many jobs, but they were not completely powerless. In 1930, Warner Brothers placed a pair of singing girls on the unused organ console in one of their theaters in order to avoid union-mandated stagehand costs ("Organ Sitters Who Sing to Save Crew," *Variety*, August 13, 1930, 3).

13 For example: "18 N.Y. RKO's Emergency Organists Get Notice," *Variety*, May 22, 1929, 63; "Salary Cuts for Organists in Chi," *Variety*, July 24, 1929, 71; "All Organists Out," *Variety*, December 3, 1930, 65; "18 Organists Dismissed by B & K," *Variety*, April 22, 1931; "Warner Gives Notice To 7 N.J. Organists," *Variety*, May 6, 1931, 66.

14 For example: "Organ Again at Strand," *Variety*, April 2, 1930, 73; "Pit Orchestras Back," *Variety*, April 23, 1930, 72; "Restoring Orchestras," *Variety*, May 14, 1930, 73; "Milwaukee Organists Back at Consoles," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, December 20, 1930, 52; "Organ Returning In Penna. Cities," *Motion Picture Herald*, March 21, 1931, 59.

15 "Publix Having Worries Over Texas Orgaist," *Variety*, November 13, 1929, 42.

aters that were under construction—the plans for which had not originally included organs.<sup>16</sup> A few months later Paramount continued the expansion of its program of new organ installations. As *Variety* observed, “This is a reversal of some of Publix’s last year’s plans when new theatres were proposed to be not only minus organs but also stages. The trend of things has been such since that not only were stages ordered back, but remodifications [sic] also made provisions for the organists, heretofore an important integral factor in Publix theatres.”<sup>17</sup> Paramount completed its revival of organ entertainment in 1931 with the establishment of a “special organ services department.” This branch of the Paramount Publix music department was dedicated to the development of novelties for Paramount organists. The slide solos created by the department—most of which featured community singing—were efficiently distributed to the growing force of Paramount organists across the country.<sup>18</sup>

Paramount Publix was not the only exhibition chain to return live music to its theaters after the advent of sound. All of the major exhibitors followed suit, although this musical renaissance was confined to large urban palaces—small-town and neighborhood houses usually pursued a sound-only policy for financial reasons and did not reinstate live musicians.<sup>19</sup> A 1929 survey conducted by the *Herald* found that among exhibitors “the organ is considered an indispensable factor in building theatre patronage.”<sup>20</sup> But why did exhibitors recommit to the substantial expense of performers and organ maintenance after their theaters had been wired for sound? Fortunately, a sophisticated trade-press narrative exists to account for the shifting fortunes of live music in the picture theater.

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16 “Par Orders 15 Wurlitzer Organs; 1st Plans Did Not Call for Them,” *Variety*, May 21, 1930, 17.

17 “Publix Orders Organs Back in New Houses,” *Variety*, August 13, 1930, 27.

18 Ed Dawson, “Publix Has Organist Service Station,” *Motion Picture Herald*, March 28, 1931, 61.

19 The combination of talking pictures and the Great Depression put the vast majority of theater musicians permanently out of work (Stanleigh Malotte, “Organist Makes Sound His Ally,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, December 21, 1929, 23).

20 W.S. Russell, “Organist Is Secure in His Position,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, June 8, 1929, 48.

As early as the summer of 1928, trade professionals were diagnosing the problem with all-sound programs: there was no “flesh” element.<sup>21</sup> The idea of a missing “flesh” element dominated the discussion of picture-theater entertainment for the next two years.<sup>22</sup> This element encompassed a diverse selection of attributes that talking pictures lacked: human connection,<sup>23</sup> personalized entertainment,<sup>24</sup> high-quality sound production, performer-patron interaction, musical variety, and a “tangible” quality that only live music could supply.<sup>25</sup> (Having an organist on hand was also deemed necessary in case the sound system failed.<sup>26</sup>) Columnists had different ideas about what was missing, but they all agreed that talking pictures alone were not entirely satisfactory. This consensus produced two immediate outcomes. On the practical front, described above, exhibitors returned live performers to the theater (at least for a time). On the theoretical front, trade professionals discussed the role of live entertainment in motion-picture exhibition and collectively imagined the future of the picture show.

The *Herald* was the only journal to publish long commentaries on this issue, and it quickly became the platform for the discussion of “flesh” in motion-picture entertainment. This discussion centered primarily around the organist. If theaters were to retain a “flesh” element, the organist was the obvious choice: he drew only one salary, but he could create the effect of an entire orchestra. In addition to this, exhibitors had already installed organs at great expense. Trade commentators argued

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21 Albert F. Brown, “Why Be ALARMED!,” *Exhibitors Herald*, July 7, 1928, 29-30.

22 “How Portland Views the ‘Flesh’ Show Idea,” *Variety*, August 27, 1930, 4. While the discussion of “flesh” took place across trade journals, only *Variety* writers were in the habit of placing the term in quotation marks.

23 “In many cases, the personal contact, the followers that many soloists have, is one of the most important factors in the success of the theatre” (Brown, “Why Be ALARMED!,” 29-30).

24 “This personal element can no more be eliminated from the theatre than the picture itself” (Russell, “Demand for Organs Optimistic Note,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, May 24, 1930, 48).

25 Eddie Dunstedter, “It’s the Personal Touch That the Audience Always Demands,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, March 16, 1929, 67.

26 “Feeling Organists’ Return Gives Some ‘Flesh’ Semblance to Bills,” *Variety*, May 14, 1930, 23.

that it was foolish to let this investment go to waste when the cost of the upkeep and the organist was comparatively low.<sup>27</sup>

Without an exception, *Herald* contributors were optimistic about the future of live entertainment. Chicago organist Albert F. Brown published the first article on the subject, entitled “Why Be ALARMED!,” in July 1928.<sup>28</sup> Journalist A. Raymond Gallo followed this up in the next month with “Organists! Do Not Fear Talkies.”<sup>29</sup> Both writers were responding to the Vitaphone (Warner Brothers) and Movietone (Fox) reels that were becoming popular in houses across the country (Figure 6.1). Although Brown and Gallo understood that talking pictures had come to stay, they did not see them as a threat to organ entertainment. Instead, Brown and Gallo predicted that talking pictures would transform the role of the organist. “He is now a feature,” wrote Brown, “a definite attraction, drawing people into the theater to the same extent that some of the other attractions do—even as talking pictures themselves do.”<sup>30</sup> Brown’s new breed of feature organist might present community singing or classical music, depending on the tastes of the audience.

Brown and Gallo’s predictions did come to pass, if only temporarily. In 1930, New York organist Louise M. Roesch published an account of her experience during the transition to talking films. Like many organists of the time, her initial reaction was one of fear: “I well remember the panic I felt as I watched the theatres in our city being wired for sound. Each one seeming to me like another nail in my musical coffin.”<sup>31</sup> Before long, however, Roesch realized that the new technology was instead “a blessing in disguise.”<sup>32</sup> Her long hours of film accompanying were replaced by three or four

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27 Lloyd Hill (Wild Oscar), “Organists Returning As Theatres Reopen And Protect Investments,” *Motion Picture Herald*, October 1, 1932, 78.

28 Brown, “Why Be ALARMED!,” 29-30.

29 A. Raymond Gallo, “Organists! Do Not Fear Talkies,” *Exhibitors Herald*, August 25, 1928, 44.

30 Brown, “Why Be ALARMED!,” 29.

31 Louise M. Roesch, “Talkies, Blessing in Disguise,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, July 5, 1930, 48.

32 *Ibid.*, 49.

VITAPHONE and MOVIE TONE  
Will Not Eliminate  
THE SPOTLIGHT ORGANIST  
BUT: *The Average or Mediocre Organist's  
Future Is Not Assured*  
ARE YOU PREPARED?  
A Master Theatre Course Under the  
Supervision of  
LEW WHITE  
*Will Prepare You for Future Demands*  
THREE MONSTER KIMBALL  
ORGANS  
Students have enrolled from all sections of the  
country  
AT THE  
White Institute of Organ  
1680 Broadway New York City

**Figure 6.1:** Organists everywhere regarded Vitaphone and Movietone as a threat to their livelihoods. In this September 1928 advertisement published in *Exhibitors Herald and Moving Picture World*, organist Lew White offered to instruct “mediocre” theater organists in the art of feature performance—thus rendering them immune to the threat of sound technology.

six-minute features per day, and her high-profile appearances garnered twice the salary. Roesch offered community singing, during which she used a public address system both to sing and to speak familiarly.<sup>33</sup> Entertainment such as this provided the “flesh” element in all of its dimensions. Indeed, Roesch was the post-sound organist that optimistic commentators had envisioned: a featured artist who would remain secure in her position for many years to come. Unfortunately, positions such as hers were hard to come by. By 1933, the last optimistic headline had been printed, and industry professionals reluctantly concluded that the theater organ was a thing of the past.<sup>34</sup>

## Sing-Along Films

In 1928, Albert F. Brown published a litany of reasons for which the organist could never be eliminated. Among them: “Then too, in community sings the mechanical organ solo is entirely out of the question for it would be merely a stiff routine and not flexible and adaptable enough to be successful.”<sup>35</sup> As it turned out, however, community singing was to remain popular in theaters long after the organs had fallen silent. Throughout the 1930s, singing was directed not from the console, but from the screen.

Sing-along films were not an innovation of the post-1927 sound era. Two series of silent sing-along films—*Sing Them Again* (1923-24) and *Ko-Ko Song Car-Tunes* (1924-27)—had already met with success. In terms of tone and repertory, these series provided a model for the sing-along films of the sound era. *Sing Them Again* inspired later nostalgic films that strove to capture the spirit of the community singing movement. One example was “The Harmony Club,” a two-reel sound short released by Columbia

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>34</sup> “Revival of Interest in Organists By Picture Theatres Noticeable,” *Variety*, August 1, 1933, 45.

<sup>35</sup> Brown, “Why Be ALARMED!,” 30.

in January 1930. In it, Geoffrey O'Hara, a well-known figure in the community singing movement who had "built a reputation as an instructor of music and song leader at public gatherings," led the singing from a stage.<sup>36</sup> He was aided by the Victor Male Chorus, who rendered old-time numbers (unnamed in the trade press) in four-part harmony.<sup>37</sup>

The popularity of the 1924-27 *Song Car-Tunes*, on the other hand, led to a second animated series from the same producer: Max Fleischer's *Screen Songs* (1929-38).<sup>38</sup> These films were comical instead of sentimental, and they conveyed the urban aesthetic for which Fleischer was known.<sup>39</sup> *Screen Songs* was by far the most popular and well-documented sing-along series of the sound era, and it is also the only series for which a large number of films are still available.

In the 1930s, a third category of sing-along films arose as well. These were organ-replacement shorts, films that featured notable organists on the screen. Even by the mid-1920s, Warner Brothers had demonstrated that sound technology was making it possible for a film to replace a musical act. Indeed, it was their original vision that sound films would bring high-end talent into every theater. As organists disappeared from theaters, film producers began to release organ solos for the screen. And many of these films featured community singing, such as the Master Art *Organlogues* (1932-35).<sup>40</sup> Before considering the important Fleischer films themselves, we might glance briefly at the *Organlogues*, which document the disappearance of the organist from American picture palaces.

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36 "Short Subjects: 'The Harmony Club'," *The Film Daily*, January 12, 1930, 13.

37 The names of the performers are incorrect and absent, respectively, in the *Motion Picture News* review ("Shorts for the Week Show a Wide Range in Entertainment: 'The Harmony Club'," *Motion Picture News*, January 4, 1930, 35).

38 Twelve *Screen Songs* can be viewed at the following address: <http://www.morgan-ellis.net/films>. Other films are also available online.

39 Jake Austen, "Hidey Hidey Hidey Ho... Boop-Boop-a-Doop!," in *The Cartoon Music Book*, edited by Daniel Goldmark and Yuval Taylor (Chicago: A Cappella Books, 2002), 61.

40 Two *Organlogue* films can be viewed at the following address: <http://www.morgan-ellis.net/films>.

### *Master Art and the Decline of Theater-Organist Culture*

The most important series of organist-replacement films to feature community singing was released by Master Art Products Inc. This was their *Organlogue* series, which featured famous console artists performing popular numbers and met with a great deal of critical acclaim. Each film featured typical cinema-style organ entertainment—popular songs, usually sung by a celebrity vocalist. The organists who appeared in these films had all occupied important consoles in the 1920s, although most had transitioned to radio and film work by this time. Two of these organists—Jesse Crawford of the New York Paramount and Dick Leibert of the Brooklyn Paramount—have been profiled in Chapter 4. While in their respective theaters, Leibert had led community singing every week, while Crawford had never invited participation. The 1930s represented a different era in movie-theater entertainment, however, and musicians everywhere were forced to modify their practices.

The screen action in these films generally consisted of two elements: lyrics and simple images (Figure 6.2). Scenic views that had “no connection, as a rule, with the words” served as background material for the text of each song, which was presented in synchronization with the organ music.<sup>41</sup> The songs were tied together by short pantomime scenes intended to illustrate the overall theme of the musical selections.<sup>42</sup> It does not appear that the organist or singer ever appeared on film, with the exception of the film “Four Star Broadcast,”<sup>43</sup> in which a still photograph of each singer was “flashed on screen” ahead of his performance.<sup>44</sup> Instead, the audience was asked to focus entirely on the words.

A number of the *Organlogue* shorts replicated popular organ solos. For example,

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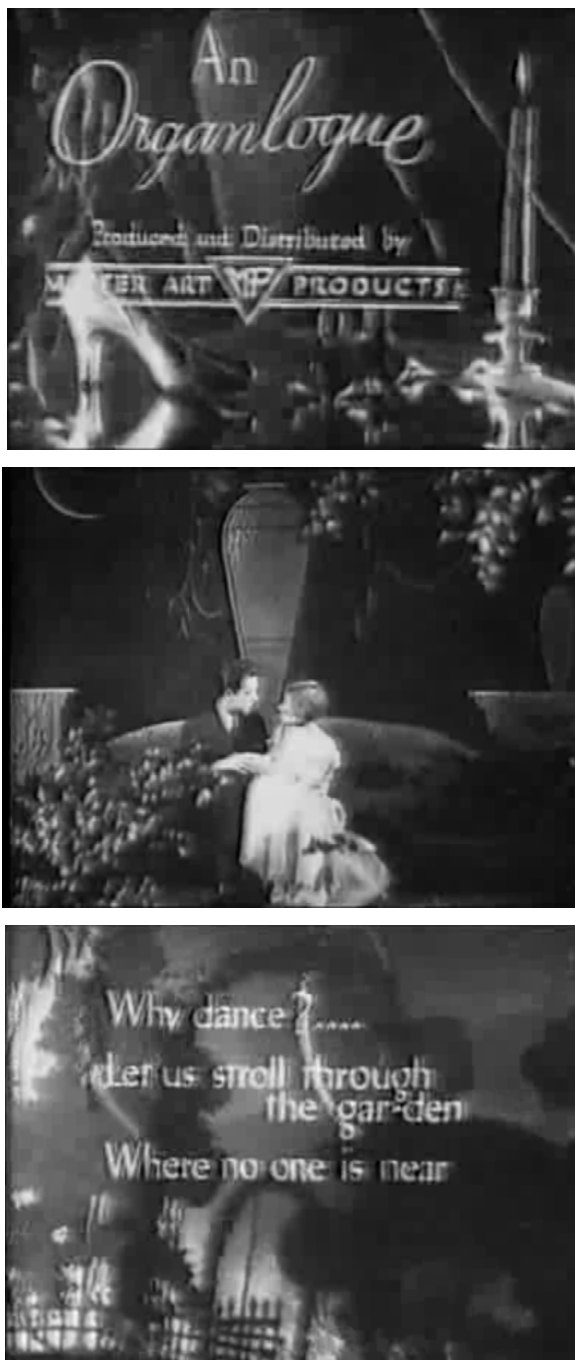
<sup>41</sup> “Talking Shorts: Melody Man,” *Variety*, July 11, 1933, 15.

<sup>42</sup> “Reviewing the Short Subjects: ‘Organlogue-ing the Hits’,” *The Film Daily*, December 22, 1933, 15.

<sup>43</sup> “Talking Shorts: ‘Four Star Broadcast’,” *Variety*, April 18, 1933, 21.

<sup>44</sup> “Talking Shorts: Four-Star Organlog,” *Variety*, March 7, 1933, 14.





**Figure 6.2:** These three images are taken from the film “Waltz Dream,” which contains one chorus each of “Why Dance?,” “I Always Go Home Alone,” and “Three O’Clock in the Morning.” The scenes all feature a young couple either dancing, strolling, or sitting together. The lyrics are presented against kaleidescopic backgrounds. The first such background, reproduced here, is based on the “garden” set before which the couple appear. The second is abstract. This film, and most of the films mentioned in this chapter, can be viewed at the following address: <http://www.morgan-ellis.net/films>.

two of the shorts were stylized as travel solos, in which the organist conducted his patrons on a virtual tour. “Round the World in Song” took viewers on a musical trip from Broadway to France, Spain, Germany, Russia, Japan, Hawaii, and California. This film featured Don Wallace at the organ, Sid Gary and the “High Hatters” quartet on vocals, and Norman Brokenshire as narrator—a role that the organist would have played in a live presentation.<sup>45</sup> Another film, entitled “Melody Tour,” conducted the audience on a journey through US cities, including Chicago, St. Louis, San Francisco, New Orleans, and New York. According to the review, this release stressed “the sentimental angle for those who come from these cities,” a tactic which no doubt helped the film to succeed.<sup>46</sup>

Many of these films were structured around simple thematic ideas, a practice that had been developed by picture-palace organists. In “Oriental Fantasy,” for example, Lew White and Charles Carlisle performed a program of thematically suitable ballads. The words were displayed against a backdrop of “beautiful girls in Oriental dances and some silhouettes of desert riders.”<sup>47</sup> In another film White teamed up with the Eton Boys for “What’s in a Name,” in which they performed a selection of “pop songs named after girls.”<sup>48</sup>

Other films in the series relied on familiar community-singing tactics: the sorts of stunts that had once been used by live theater organists everywhere. “Tongue Twisters” featured the classic gag in which an organist asked patrons to sing difficult lyrics set to familiar tunes.<sup>49</sup> In this film, as in all of them, the organist remained

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45 “Talking Shorts: Round the World in Song,” *Variety*, January 3, 1933, 19.

46 “Short Subject Reviews: ‘Melody Tour,’” *The Film Index*, November 10, 1933, 12.

47 “Short Subject Reviews: ‘Oriental Fantasy,’” *The Film Daily*, July 27, 1933, 6.

48 “Talking Shorts: What’s in a Name,” *Variety*, October 30, 1934, 16. Incidentally, White had not been associated with community singing during his picture-palace career. He was featured at the New York Roxy, a theater famed for exclusive highbrow entertainment, and he later had a successful broadcasting and recording career.

49 Tongue twisters, while often incorporated into the organ solo, never constituted an entire solo on their own. In this manner, the *Organlogue* films are a distortion of historical organ solo practice.

silent. Instead, the vocalist took on the master-of-ceremonies role and invited the audience to sing.<sup>50</sup> This represents a curious aspect to these films. They had originally been intended to feature the organist and replace the organ solo—hence their titles as *Organlogues*—but at the same time they routinely diminished the role of the organist. The console artist, who had once been a complete entertainer in the picture palace, one who had spoken and joked via slide, and who had even sung, was now responsible only for the instrumental soundtrack. And by 1935, with the demise of the *Organlogue* series, the era of the theater organist was truly over.

### *Fleischer in the Sound Era*

While many different production companies experimented with sing-along films in the sound era, Fleischer was both the first to do so and the most successful. In addition to its role in the community-singing narrative, the *Screen Song* series is generally important to music historians, film historians, and scholars of popular culture (Figure 6.3). Today the series is best remembered for introducing Betty Boop to the American public. Even her name is derived from a *Screen Song*: she kept it after an appearance in the 1930 film “Betty Co-Ed.”<sup>51</sup> The series also preserves filmed performances by some of the most important entertainers of the decade: Rudy Vallée, Ethel Merman, the Mills Brothers, and dozens of other top performers. The *Screen Song* series is an overlooked repository of popular music documentation, and it deserves a great deal of further study.

Since the Fleischer brothers had been at the frontier of sound innovation for five years, it was natural that they should be the first to take advantage of sound technology in the production of sing-along films. Their position in the industry, however, had

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50 “Talking Shorts: ‘Tongue Twisters,’” *Variety*, May 9, 1933, 14.

51 This film, and most of the films mentioned in this chapter, can be viewed at the following address: <http://www.morgan-ellis.net/films>.



**Figure 6.3:** This advertisement for *Paramount Screen Songs* appeared in a June 1929 issue of *Exhibitors Herald-World*. The accompanying text reads, “No short subject in sound during the current season leaped to more universal popularity than Paramount Screen Songs. Scores of theatres of all classes voluntarily wrote wires and letters of enthusiastic praise for these novelties. The words of the songs appear in unique and humorous style on the screen, with the celebrated ‘bouncing ball’ to keep time. With instrumental and vocal accompaniment. The entire audience joins in singing—and signified its approval at the end by thunderous applause. Prove this for yourself!”

changed significantly. The *Song Car-Tunes*, launched in 1924, had been originally distributed by Red Seal, Fleischer's own company, but accumulating financial troubles meant that Red Seal had to be abandoned in 1926. Fleischer's production company, Out of the Inkwell Films, was taken over by Alfred Weiss, who renamed it Inkwell Studios and negotiated a new distribution contract with Paramount.<sup>52</sup> Weiss soon declared bankruptcy and disappeared, and his brief tenure at the helm of Inkwell Studios produced some confusing late releases of *Song Car-Tunes* under his own name.<sup>53</sup> Paramount would continue to distribute all Fleischer products until it absorbed Inkwell Studios in 1941.<sup>54</sup>

When the successor to the *Song Car-Tune* shorts, the *Screen Song* series, premiered in 1929, the role played by sing-along films in the picture program was as yet poorly defined. Organists were still using sing-along films as community-singing aids: in March 1929, organist Arthur Gutow used the Fleischer film "East Side, West Side" in this way at the Michigan theater in Detroit.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, *Screen Songs* were being presented elsewhere as stand-alone short films. During this period of transition, the film industry in general demonstrated uncertainty about the role of sound shorts. As late as November 1929, *Exhibitors Herald-World* still had two separate categories for sound-short listings: "Sound Act Releases"<sup>56</sup> and "Short Features With Sound."<sup>57</sup>

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52 Fleischer, *Out of the Inkwell*, 46-7.

53 For example, see: "Short Subjects: 'Down in Jungle Town'," *The Film Daily*, October 20, 1929, 10. One of the Biophone releases, "My Old Kentucky Home," was famously the first *Song Car-Tune* to be premiered with a soundtrack ("Opinions on Pictures: 'My Old Kentucky Home'," *Motion Picture News*, October 5, 1929, 1264). The other Biophone film, however, is entitled "Summer Harmonies" and cannot be identified with any pre-existing film ("Opinions on Pictures: 'Summer Harmonies'," *Motion Picture News*, October 5, 1929, 1264).

54 Between 1947 and 1951, Famous Studios—later renamed Paramount Cartoon Studios—created new animated *Screen Songs* for distribution by Paramount. These shorts all featured classic songs.

55 "Organ Solos: Arthur Gutow," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, March 30, 1929, 55. This number had been released as a *Screen Song* in the previous month, but it had also featured as a silent *Song Car-Tune* in 1926. It is impossible to be certain which version Gutow used.

56 "Sound Act Releases," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, November 16, 1929, 54.

57 "Short Features With Sound," *Exhibitors Herald-World*, November 16, 1929, 54.

The former were intended to replace live acts on the bill, while the latter were short features (mostly comedies) with soundtracks. Critics assigned the *Screen Songs* to both categories. The sing-along element and the appearance of celebrity performers positioned the *Screen Songs* as “sound acts,” while the comical animation and rudimentary story lines indicated that the films were “short features.” This tension played out for years as reviewers criticized the films for falling short in one category or the other.

Two *Film Daily* reviews illustrate the two attitudes that a contemporary observer might take toward a *Screen Song*. The first concerns “Old Black Joe,” one of the earliest releases: “This subject is best when the cartoon master of ceremonies, so to speak, does his funny antics and drops when the words only appear on the screen.”<sup>58</sup> In other words, “Old Black Joe” was an excellent “short feature” but a mediocre “sound act.” Another *Film Daily* reviewer relied on a different set of values when he assessed “That Old Gang of Mine.” After describing the film, he observed, “They have a very fine quartette singing this, which makes it an entertaining number.”<sup>59</sup> This reviewer considered the film to be first and foremost a “sound act.”<sup>60</sup>

Reviewers also differed in their opinions as to whether it was necessary for the audience to join in for a *Screen Song* to be a success. One *Variety* reviewer proclaimed that the cartoons were only of value in theaters that featured community singing.<sup>61</sup> Another *Variety* reviewer observed that the films could be quite successful even without participation.<sup>62</sup> A third *Variety* reviewer found that the cartoons had the power to

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58 “Short Subject Reviews: ‘Old Black Joe,’” *The Film Daily*, March 10, 1929, 11.

59 “Review of Sound Shorts: ‘That Old Gang of Mine,’” *The Film Daily*, July 5, 1931, 11.

60 On occasion, the *Screen Song* series transcended all genres of motion-picture entertainment and simply reveled in its iconic status. The Paramount theater in Los Angeles borrowed an idea from the silent era and staged a full-scale burlesque of Fleischer’s famous bouncing ball as part of a stage presentation. After patrons had watched and presumably sung with one of the films earlier in the show, they witnessed a live reenactment of the sing-along stunt in which an actor in a white sailor suit was “jerked from word to word on a large screen by wires from the flies” (“Paramount, L.A.,” *Variety*, August 11, 1931, 42).

61 “Okay for nabe houses, where the gang can be coaxed to join” (“Talking Shorts: ‘Please Go ‘Way & Let Me Sleep,’” *Variety*, August 4, 1931, 18).

62 “The didn’t sing at this house but they liked it” (“Talking Shorts: ‘Jungle Festival,’” *Variety*, October 13, 1931, 14).

inspire singing even in deluxe houses “where the mob doesn’t commonly join in.”<sup>63</sup> He then recommended the film for any theater, no matter the patronage.

At first Fleischer picked up the new *Screen Song* series right where he had left off, in terms of style and repertoire, with the *Song Car-Tunes*. Over the course of the *Screen Songs* series, however, Max Fleischer—influenced by Paramount—significantly changed his approach to the films. These changes concerned song repertoire, method of song performance, and treatment of the verse.

The *Screen Songs*, which ran from 1929 to 1938, can be divided into three types based on form and content. The first type comprises the early cartoons (1929-1932), which did not feature a performer. These early cartoons had a basic format that was always recognizable. This description applies into 1932, even though the first cartoons featuring filmed performers had appeared by that time. First, the chorus of the song was heard over the opening title. This was followed by an opening cartoon, which usually suited the subject matter of the song and might incorporate the chorus, although most of the time the music consisted solely of quotes from other songs that were appropriate to the on-screen action. At the end of the cartoon, some form of oscillating motion transformed into the bouncing ball, the rest of the screen went black, and a voice invited the audience to sing along. The bouncing-ball portion of the sing-along consisted primarily of words, while still cartoons provided humorous commentary on the bottom of the screen. The tempos for the sing-along were invariably very slow, as would be appropriate for a group of amateurs joining together in song. After a verse and chorus in this format, a second verse was provided beneath a full-screen animation, usually of a character playing the music on one or more instruments. A final chorus was provided in the form of transforming words, which assumed the shapes and activities that they described. At the very end, a comic outro unified the subject matter and brought the story to a close.

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63 “Talking Shorts: ‘Let Me Call You Sweetheart’,” July 26, 1932, 17.

## Chapter 6. *The Advent of Sound*

Next come the middle cartoons (1932-34), our second type, in which an on-screen performer leads the singing. The form of these cartoons is similar to those treated above, although they were less consistent. Sometimes the second verse with animation or the final transforming chorus was abandoned, and eventually all of the sing-along after the bouncing-ball portion was replaced with a closing cartoon. Still, all of these shorts featured individual singers or small vocal groups. The performer(s) occasionally provides a solo chorus before the audience was invited to join in, although this was not the norm. Verses, especially second verses, were generally excised in these middle cartoons, and some of the presentations were medleys of different popular choruses. The songs were often fairly recent, and in some cases closely associated with the person who appears in the cartoon to sing them, such as Rudy Vallée with “Betty Co-Ed.”

These middle cartoons led to the late ones (1935-38), our third type, in which an on-screen performer provided a non-participatory rendition of the song before the audience was invited to join in. These final cartoons featured dance bands with unnamed vocal soloists instead of star singers with anonymous accompaniment, a reflection of changing tastes in music. Each *Screen Song* opened with a cartoon in the form of a series of news shorts, each a comical play on words or perceptions. Eventually one of the shorts introduced the band, which usually performed an instrumental chorus before the vocalist came on stage to sing a chorus. The band leader then invited the audience to join in, and the band played a final chorus without the vocalist while the words and bouncing ball were superimposed on the scene. This was followed by a final cartoon short that brought the entire presentation to a satisfying close. While the cartoon portion of the early *Screen Songs* was usually based on the topic of the song, that was no longer the case in the final years. The central focus was always the song, and it was the treatment of the song that determined the form of the cartoon as a whole.



In terms of repertory, the early *Screen Songs* featured old favorites. (Contemporary songs entered the repertory in 1931 and dominated it from 1933.) The trade press continued to have doubts about the entertainment value of old songs and remained skeptical about popular interest in musical nostalgia. When the Fleischers released “After the Ball” in 1929, for example, the *Variety* reviewer wrote, “Reminiscent to the oldtimers; what it means to the flaps questionable.”<sup>64</sup> By 1934 the *Screen Song* repertory would be transformed to feature brand-new numbers exclusively. However, we will never know what the film-trade professionals thought about this move. By this point the trade press appears to have lost interest, and no reviews of the final four years of *Screen Songs* were published in any national journal.

The change in repertoire was initiated by Paramount. In 1929, Paramount announced that it intended to introduce “prominent entertainment personalities” into the company’s lineup of short features.<sup>65</sup> The Fleischers began to feature live performers in their animated films in 1930. Cartoon scholar Christopher Lehman describes the unique relationship that the Fleischer brothers had with the performing artists who appeared in their cartoons: “Studio employees visited jazz clubs in New York and chose the acts they wanted for the cartoons. If a musician agreed to star in and sing for a cartoon, Paramount Pictures would promise to release the film to the theater where he was scheduled to appear. Former Fleischer animator Myron Waldman remembered, ‘The performers jumped at the chance to appear on screens all over—coverage they could not get before.’”<sup>66</sup> While Lehman’s research does not focus on the sing-along cartoons, he claims that the Fleischers would have treated their musicians for the *Screen Songs* series the same as for any other.<sup>67</sup>

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64 “Talking Shorts: ‘After the Ball,’” *Variety*, October 16, 1929, 17. See also: “Talking Shorts: ‘Russian Lullaby,’” *Variety*, February 23, 1932, 13.

65 “Paramount Offering 80 Sound Shorts,” *Exhibitors Herald-World*, June 15, 1929, 126.

66 Christopher P. Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon: Black Representation in American Animated Short Films, 1907-1954* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 30.

67 Lehman, “Question for Jake Austen,” email to author, December 13, 2010.

The on-screen appearance of a star performer could draw patrons to a theater in a region where that performer was popular, but it could also damage box office receipts if the performer was unknown. Trade-press reviewers were concerned about regional inconsistencies in the popularity of certain *Screen Song* stars, and warned theater managers to choose their films with care. For example, reviewers for two separate publications advised discretion in booking “I Ain’t Got Nobody,” a 1932 film which featured the Mills Brothers. Both agreed that the film was excellent, but they recommended that exhibitors tailor the film’s promotion to local tastes.<sup>68</sup> (There is no evidence that these reviewers were addressing racial concerns, but the possibility cannot be discounted.) The introduction of celebrity performers into the *Screen Songs* changed the way in which theaters used these films. Previously, exhibitors had been concerned only with the catchiness of the song and the cleverness of the animation. Now they had to consider the star power of the film’s headliner.

The introduction of an on-screen singer into the sing-along transformed the audience experience. In the early *Screen Songs*, which incorporated only disembodied voices or remained strictly instrumental, patrons focused on their own participation. These films featured the act of community singing itself, and the enjoyment derived from participation was the primary object. In the late *Screen Songs*, the focus was split: the audience watched musicians present the song on-screen, sometimes at great length, before they joined in. This format was in part a response to the repertory. Patrons couldn’t sing songs they didn’t know, and it was therefore necessary for an on-screen performer to introduce the number first. The late *Screen Songs* presented

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68 “Talking Shorts: ‘I Ain’t Got Nobody,’” *Variety*, June 7, 1932, 20: “Managers will be the best judges of what [the Mills Brothers] mean on the radio in various communities and how much they’re worth on the marquee and billing.” “Reviews of Short Subjects: ‘I Ain’t Got Nobody,’” *The Film Daily*, June 11, 1932, 17: “Whether or not the Mills Brothers of current radio popularity are well enough known in your community to be worth something as a name draw, the fact remains that their work in this short ought to prove plenty satisfying to almost any audience.” The same concern arose regarding Arthur Tracy a year later: “It’s just another of these shorts meaning little all around and, so far as Tracy’s professional longevity is concerned, a liability. Tracy, unfortunately, is one of those individuals who listens better in the abstract than he appears in likeness—whether stage or screen” (“Talking Shorts: Romantic Melodies,” *Variety*, July 18, 1933, 36).

the chorus twice before the audience joined in, once in instrumental form and once sung. The preceding verses were usually omitted.

The exclusion of verses was a gradual process. The producers of sing-along films used three techniques: they incorporated both verses, they repeated the first verse in place of the second verse, or they presented only the more tuneful refrain. In cartoons featuring old songs, Fleischer tended to incorporate both verses, or at least one. In just a few cases, such as “After the Ball” and “Little Annie Rooney,” only the refrain was used. These are some of the oldest songs to appear in the *Screen Songs* series, and Fleischer reduced them to their most memorable component. At the same time, Fleischer sometimes presented new songs complete with verses. The decision seems to have been made on a song-by-song basis.

### *Participation?*

It is not clear that audience participation was important in the presentation of a *Screen Song*. As already noted, reviewers did not always consider participation to be necessary for the success of a sing-along film. In addition, from time to time there are also indications in the films themselves that participation was not required, or perhaps not even advisable.<sup>69</sup>

In the early cartoons, for example, recorded voices played an unusual role. The very first films had included only a spoken introduction to the sing-along. In this respect these cartoons emulated the organ-based community sing: the cartoon’s spoken invitation to sing recalled the similar invitation delivered by an organist via a public address system. This was followed in both cases by an instrumental presentation of the song. Early in the run of the *Screen Songs*, however, singing voices began to be heard—first just on the final chorus, and finally in all portions of the sing-along.

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69 I acquired copies of the extant *Screen Songs* from animation historian Jerry Beck in 2008. The remainder of my comments are based on these films.

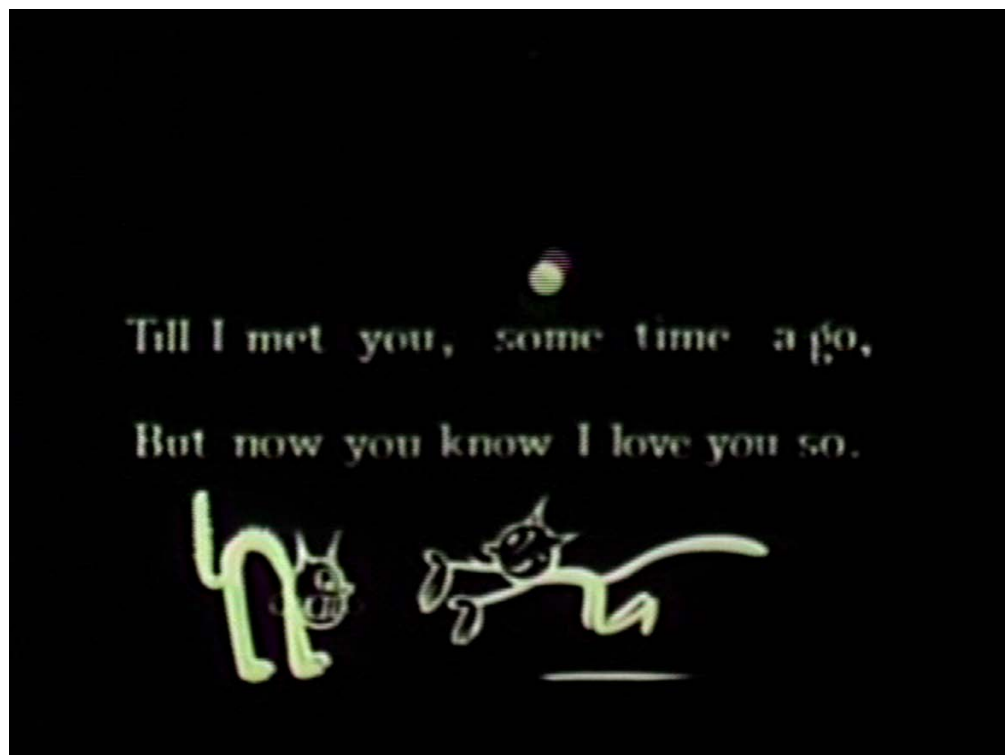
These voices were always anonymous and did not usually draw undue attention to themselves.

In some cases, however, the voices stood out from the cartoon's soundscape. In the bouncing-ball portion of "Put On Your Old Grey Bonnet" (1929), for example, Fleischer provided comic voices for the lines of the song spoken by Silas and Miranda. By casting such characters and including a separate narrator, Fleischer dramatized the song and provided unusual comic detail. And this, presumably, discouraged audience participation, for if the audience were singing full force they would not take note of the film's special effects. It seems as if Fleischer, in this short, was expecting the patrons to listen instead of to sing. This is only one of many examples in which either the voices or instrumentation were treated in such a way as to imply that they were to be listened to, that they were more than a backdrop for community singing. The second verse of another 1929 cartoon, "Oh, You Beautiful Doll," for example, is provided with a flute obligato played by an on-screen character (Figure 6.4). The audience did not need to stop singing in order to be amused by this, but they would have at least divided their attention between participation and appreciation.

There are additional reasons to question the role of audience participation during these films as well. Each cartoon presented an increasingly complex participatory environment. As the film proceeded, the audience was furnished with more and more visual and auditory stimulation. At the beginning, the first verse and chorus appeared with the bouncing ball against a simple background (Figure 6.5). Here, clearly, the focus was on singing. The second verse, however, was typically accompanied by a full-screen animation. Could a participant have read the lyrics to the second verse (probably unfamiliar) at the bottom of the screen while also focusing on the animated antics? Additionally, this is the point where recorded voices regularly joined in if they were not already present. Did some of the patrons stop to look and listen? Finally, the last chorus was ornamented with transforming words (Figure 6.6). While these were



**Figure 6.4:** The second verse of “Oh, You Beautiful Doll” (1929).



**Figure 6.5:** The first verse of “Oh, You Beautiful Doll” (1929).

not hard to read, the rapid-fire humor involved in the transformations was often subtle and clever. Were patrons tempted to drop out and appreciate the animation?

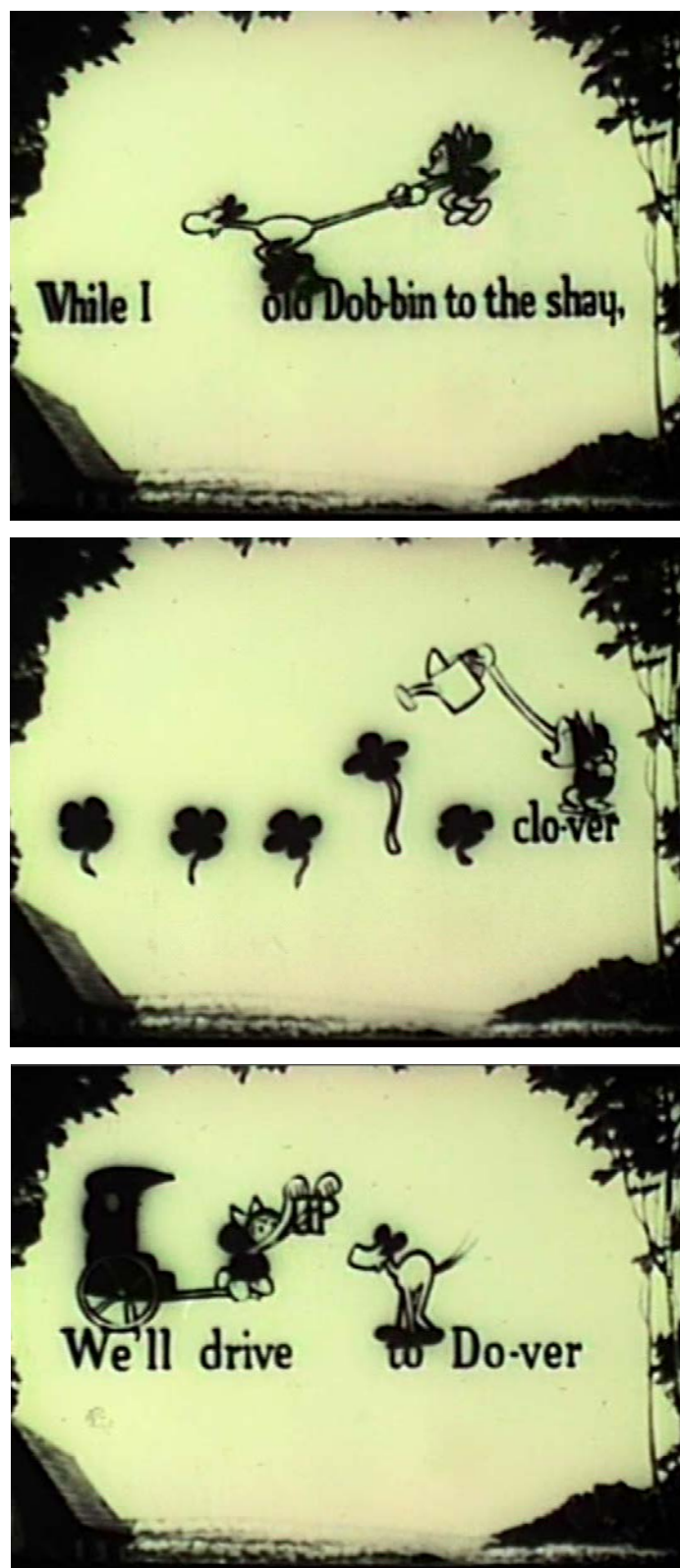
The second wave of *Screen Songs* began with the appearance of Rudy Vallée in the 1930 “Stein Song.” This well-received innovation revolutionized the series, and a number of performing artists were immediately signed by Paramount to appear in one-reelers. Vallée himself committed to appear in several more *Screen Songs*, always performing a number that he had made famous.<sup>70</sup>

But again, how much did people sing along? Would a fan of Rudy Vallée want to sing with him, or listen to him? Often sing-along and audience performance blended effortlessly into one another, as when the Mills Brothers scatted a conclusion to two bouncing-ball choruses in “Dinah” (1933). The patron in this case transitioned instantly from noisy participant to silent viewer. A more subtle case appeared in “Sleepy Time Down South” (1932), when the Boswell Sisters provided sophisticated vocal harmonies for a second chorus. Clearly they were performing, showing off their vocal prowess above and beyond that of the audience. At the same time, participation was still welcome. In “The Peanut Vendor” (1933), featuring Armida, the bouncing ball sing-along was interrupted by a dance interlude at two different points; in another film, Irene Bordoni mimed dramatically to a second sing-along chorus of “Just a Gigolo” (1932). Both of these ladies expected to be watched and appreciated, not just sung with.

That border between sing-along and performance finally became impregnable in the late *Screen Songs*, starting with “I Wished On the Moon” in 1935 (this film followed a year-long gap in production). Overall, these shorts built in far less singing time than had the first *Screen Songs*. In fact, many of the prints that I obtained in 2009 from animation historian Jerry Beck have been edited to remove the performance and sing-along entirely, implying that they continued to be exhibited in theaters

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70 “New Ideas Injected in Paramount Shorts; Big Names and Novelties Bring Favorable Reactions,” *The Film Daily*, November 29, 1931, 8.



**Figure 6.6:** The final chorus of "Put On Your Old Gray Bonnet" (1929).

as animated shorts long after the community-singing craze had died out. Unlike the middle-period cartoons, in which performance and sing-along blended into one another, these final cartoons made the role of the viewer clear at all times: first the band and singer performed, then the audience got to sing.

The *Screen Song* series transitioned from a focus on participation to a focus on mere spectatorship. Instead of providing old favorites that the audience wanted to *sing*, the films were now providing star performers whom that audience wanted to *see*. These performers were presenting songs that were in their repertoire, songs that were appropriate for a contemporary dance ensemble, and songs that would benefit the band if turned into popular hits. These films, however, cannot be explained away as music marketing ploys alone. The final *Screen Songs* also exhibit the dying gasps of participatory music culture in the movie theater. After years of exposure to the new sound technology, audiences were finally being trained to sit quietly and to view films as passive consumers. The “flesh” element, which had been so prized at the turn of the decade, was almost entirely gone, and with it the opportunity to interact with theater performers. The final *Screen Songs* retained the sing-along form only out of habit. The patrons, however, were no longer accustomed to joining in. And with that development the practice of picture-palace community singing was over—a thing of the past.





## APPENDIX

# TABLES OF ORGANISTS AND THEATERS

**Table A.1:** Theaters in which community singing was practiced, as documented by *Exhibitors Herald* and *Variety*.

State	City	Theater	Organist
Arizona	Phoenix	Orpheum	Ted Crawford
California	Berkeley	Fox California	Floyd Wright
		Boulevard	Martha Green Ann Leaf
		Loew's State	J. Wesley Lord
		Los Angeles United Artists	Ollie Wallace
		Metropolitan	Eddie Carter Herb Kern
	San Francisco	El Capitan	Mel Hertz
		Fox	Glen Goff
		Granada	Iris Vinning
	Santa Barbara	Granada	Ted Crawford
Colorado	Denver	Orpheum	George Bent
		Paramount	Bob Bailey "Jackie" (Katherine Kaderly) "Jean" (Eloise Rowan)
Connecticut	Danbury	Palace	Al Forest
	Hartford	Strand	Walter Seifert

*Continued on next page.*

## Appendix

**Table A.1 (Cont.):** Theaters in which community singing was practiced.

State	City	Theater	Organist
Connecticut (cont.)	New Haven	Roger Sherman	Dick Betts Edgar Ford
	Stamford	Publix Palace	Dick Betts Banks Kennedy
	Torrington	Warner	Frank Simpson
Florida	Miami	Capitol	Durand Sauls
		Olympia	F. Donald (Don) Miller
Georgia	Atlanta	Howard	Arthur Martel • also Martal [sic]
Illinois	Bloomington	Majestic	Milton Herth
	Champaign	Central Park	Belle Melrose
		rko Virginia	“Wen” Kennedy
	Chicago	Admiral	Cornelius Maffie
		Alamo	Ramon Berry • also Raymond [sic]
		Ambassador	Don Pedro Espinosa • also Espanosa [sic]
		Avalon	Noble Barker Leonard Smith
		Belmont	Earl Abel • also Able [sic] Harry Zimmerman
		Belpark	Jean Anthony Bill Bennett “Symphonic” Hawley
		Broadway Strand	Don Isham
		Buckingham	Harold Daniels
		Capitol	Leo Terry
		Central Park	Don Cordon
		Chelten	George Saunders

Continued on next page.

**Table A.1 (Cont.):** Theaters in which community singing was practiced.

State	City	Theater	Organist
Illinois (cont.)	Chicago (cont.)	Chicago	Edward K. House Henry B. Murtagh Preston Sellers
		Colony	Edmund C. Fitch
		Congress	Earl Abel • also Able [sic]
		Covent Garden	“Symphonic” Hawley
		Crown	Grace R. Clarke Don Cordon
		Crystal	Jean Anthony Bob Billings Herb Schaffer
		Diversey	Francis Kromar
		Embassy	Joseph Alexander Don Isham Paul Davis
		Empress	Harry L. Wagner
		Fox Sheridan	Don Cordon
		Gateway	J. Earl Estes • also Earle [sic], Estees [sic] Henri A. Keates • also Keats [sic]
		Granada	Jean Anthony Albert F. Brown Edward K. House Don Isham
		Harding	Edward K. House Edward (Eddie) Meikel • also Miekel [sic], Meikels [sic], Mickels [sic] Leonard Salvo
		Highland	Leonard Salvo
		Highway	Don Pedro Espinosa • also Espanosa [sic]
Continued on next page.			

## Appendix

**Table A.1 (Cont.):** Theaters in which community singing was practiced.

State	City	Theater	Organist
Illinois (cont.)	Chicago (cont.)	Howard	Edna J. Sellers
		Irving	J. Virgel Huffman
		Knickerbocker	Jules Lurey
		Lawndale	Don Cordon
		Marbro	Albert F. Brown Edna J. Sellers
		Marquette	McNeil Smith • also Mc Neal [sic]
		Marshall Square	“Doc” (Louis A.) Webb
		McVickers	Albert F. Brown Don Cordon Helen Crawford • always Mrs. Jesse Crawford Henri A. Keates • also Keats [sic]
		Norshore	Chauncey Haines Henri A. Keates • also Keats [sic]
		North Center	Ray Turner Gabe Wellner
		Oriental	Milton Charles Henri A. Keates • also Keats [sic]
			Edward (Eddie) Meikel • also Miekel [sic], Meikels [sic], Mickels [sic] Edna J. Sellers Preston Sellers
		Pantheon	Leo Terry
		Paradise	Henri A. Keates • also Keats [sic]
		Patio	Johnny Devine
		Picadilly	Leo Terry
		Regal	Sammy Williams

*Continued on next page.*

**Table A.1 (Cont.):** Theaters in which community singing was practiced.

State	City	Theater	Organist
Illinois (cont.)	Chicago (cont.)	Roosevelt	Edmund C. Fitch
		Senate	Eddie Hanson Preston Sellers
		Sheridan	Edmund C. Fitch Harold (Harry, Hal) Pearl
		Shore	George Vlach • also Valch [sic]
		Stratford	Edmund C. Fitch Doris Gutow Mrs. Maurie Hilbloom
		Terminal	L. Carlos Meier
		Tiffin	William Walker W. Remington Welch
		Tivoli	Milton Charles Eddie Hanson Edward K. House Preston Sellers
		Tower	Basil Crystal Burns • also Basel Cristole [sic], Basil Cristol [sic] Eddie Hanson J. Earl Estes • also Estees [sic] Eddie Hanson
		Uptown	Milton Charles Eddie Hanson Edward K. House Henri A. Keates • also Keats [sic] Edward (Eddie) Meikel • also Miekkel [sic], Meikels [sic], Mickels [sic] Edna J. Sellers Preston Sellers
		Wallace	Dena Raphael
	Cicero	Palace	Jerry Jackson

*Continued on next page.*

# Appendix

**Table A.1 (Cont.):** Theaters in which community singing was practiced.

State	City	Theater	Organist
Illinois (cont.)	Evanston	Varsity	Bill Bennett
	La Grange	La Grange	Fred Beck
	Oak Ridge	Lamar	Ray Turner
	Park Ridge	Pickwick	J. Gibbs Spring
	Rockford	Coronado	Ray Turner
Indiana	Hammond	Paramount	Milton Herth
		State	Carl Coleman J. Gibbs Spring
	Indianapolis	Fountain Square	Dale Young
		Indiana	Dessa Bird Milton Slosser Dale Young
		Publix Circle	Dale Young
	Michigan City	Tivoli	Ted Campbell
	Muncie	Rivoli	F. LeRoy Nelson
	South Bend	Granada	Grenville E. Tompsett
Iowa	Des Moines	Capitol	Herbert (Herbie) Lee Koch Carroll Wallace
		Paramount	Herbert (Herbie) Lee Koch William (Billy) Muth
	Ottumwa	Capitol	Harold J. Lyon
Louisiana	New Orleans	Loew's State	Ada Rives
		Publix Saenger	J. Wesley Lord "Herbie" Ray McNamara
		Publix Strand	Betty Hammond
Maryland	Baltimore	Loew's Century	John Eltermann Al Hornig Paul Tompkins
Massachusettes	Boston	Loew's State	Ray Frazee Elsie Robbins Gross Birge Peterson

*Continued on next page.*

**Table A.1 (Cont.):** Theaters in which community singing was practiced.

State	City	Theater	Organist
Massachusetts (cont.)	Boston (cont.)	Memorial	Leo Weber
		Metropolitan	Arthur Martel • also Martal [sic]
		RKO Keith	Louis Weir
	Concord	Capitol	Brad Braley
	Dorchester	Publix Morton	“Hal” Friedman
	Springfield	Paramount	Adolph Goebel
	Worcester	Plymouth	Russ Henderson • also Rus [sic]
Michigan	Detroit	Capitol	Merle Clark
		Fisher	Arsene Siegel
		Fox	Armin Franz Jack Franz
		Hollywood	Robert G. Clarke
		Michigan	Arthur Gutow
		Publix Fisher	Merle Clark Arthur Gutow
		Publix Riviera	F. Donald (Don) Miller
		RKO Downtown	Lew Betterly Russell Bice
		RKO Proctors	Rex Koury
		RKO Uptown	Lew Betterly
		State	F. Donald (Don) Miller William Pond
	Kalamazoo	State	Clarence Leverenz
	Menominee	Lloyd’s	Floyd Hofmann Kenneth (Ken) T. Wright
	Troy	RKO Proctors	Rex Koury
<i>Continued on next page.</i>			

# Appendix

**Table A.1 (Cont.):** Theaters in which community singing was practiced.

State	City	Theater	Organist
Minnesota	Minneapolis	Minnesota Publix	Eddie Dunstedter Harold Ramsay • née Ramsbottom; also Ramsey [sic] Eloise Rowan
		State	Larry Goldberg
	St. Paul	Paramount	“Singing Bill” (Bill Zuckerman) • also Zukor [sic]
Missouri	Kansas City	Loew’s Midland	Hans Flath Harvey Hammond
		Newman	Earl Thurston Ken Widenor
		Pantages	Ted Meyn
	St. Louis	Grand Central	Stuart Barrie Arthur L. Utt
		Loew’s State	Tom Terry
		Missouri	Milton Slosser • also Steve Slosser [sic]
Montana	Billings	Babcock	Henri Monnet
Nebraska	Nebraska City	Paramount	Edna Merle Bain
	North Platte	Fox	Eddie Stone
	Omaha	Paramount	Adolph Goebel Esther Leaf
		Rialto	Louis A. Webb
		Riviera	Herbert (Herbie) Lee Koch
		World Paramount	J. Wesley Lord
New Jersey	Hackensack	Fox Oritana	Ken Widenor Lee Woodbury
		Warner Fabian	George Latch Charles Possa
	Jersey City	Central	Jimmy Rich
		Fox State	Herb Kern

*Continued on next page.*



**Table A.1 (Cont.):** Theaters in which community singing was practiced.

State	City	Theater	Organist	
New Jersey (cont.)	Jersey City (cont.)	Jersey	Bill Cimler	
		Loew's Jersey City	Dick Liebert Ted Meyn Leo Weber	
		Stanley	Frank Albanese Harold Rieder Hy C. Geis Harold Rieder	
		State	Leo Weber	
	Newark	Branford	Harold Rieder Jack Taylor James (Jim) F. Thomas Frank White	
		Ohio Midland	Art Thompson	
		RKO Proctor's Palace	Stanley Pinhero	
		Westwood	Gray Burt	
	New York	Albany	RKO Palace	Ray Turner
			Warner Brothers	Steve Boisclair
Buffalo		Century	Bob Demming	
		Hippodrome	Henry B. Murtagh	
		Kensington	Harold (Harry, Hal) F. Pearl Nelson Selby	
		Lafayette	Harold (Harry, Hal) F. Pearl	
		Shea's Bailey	Nelson Selby	
		Shea's Buffalo	Herbert (Herbie) Lee Koch Henry B. Murtagh	
		New York City: Bronx	Fairmount	Max Marlin
New York City: Brooklyn		46th St.	John Gart	
		Bushwick	Eddie Schwartz	
Continued on next page.				

# Appendix

**Table A.1 (Cont.):** Theaters in which community singing was practiced.

State	City	Theater	Organist
New York (cont.)	New York City: Brooklyn (cont.)	Fox	Ron Baggot Hal Beckett Bob Hamilton Don Moore Rosa Rio Bob West
		Fox Carlton	Jack Meyer
		Fox Carroll	Jack Ward
		Kenmore	Arlo Hults • also Hultz [sic]
		Loew's 46th St.	William Huffman
		Loew's Kings	"Singing Bill" (Bill Zuckerman) • also Zukor [sic]
		Loew's Metropolitan	Katherine Kaderly Max Marlin
		Loew's Pitkin	John Gart
		Madison	Walter Anderson Bernard (Bernie) Cowham Bob Machat
		Marlboro	Don Williams
		Paramount	Earl Abel • also Able [sic] Stuart Barrie Merle Clark Henry B. Murtagh Elsie Thompson Bob West
		Pitkin	William J. Gilroy
		rKO Albee	"Wild Oscar" (Lloyd Hill) Arlo Hults • also Hultz [sic]
		Roosevelt	Nelson Hosking
			<i>Continued on next page.</i>

**Table A.1 (Cont.):** Theaters in which community singing was practiced.

State	City	Theater	Organist
New York (cont.)	New York City: Brooklyn (cont.)	Warner Strand	John Hammond C. (Charles) Sharpe Minor Louise M. Roesch Ken Widenor Johnny Winters
		New York City: Manhattan	Academy of Music
		Beacon	C. (Charles) Sharpe Minor
		Chester	Arlo Hults • also Hultz [sic]
		Hippodrome	Frederick (Fred) Kinsley Walter Wild
		Hollywood	Bob Soffer
		Loew's 83rd St.	Leo Weber
		Loew's 175th	Henrietta Kamern "Singing Bill" (Bill Zuckerman) • also Zukor [sic] "Wild Oscar" (Lloyd Hill)
		Loew's Paradise	Harold Ramsay • née Ramsbottom; also Ramsey [sic] Bob Ross "Ralph" (Ralph Tuchband) "Singing Bill" (Bill Zuckerman) • also Zukor [sic]
		Loew's State	Billy Barnes Frederick (Fred) Kinsley George Latch Charles Williams
		Paradise	Con Maffie
		Park Plaza	Lou Bonder
		Proctor's 58th St.	William J. Gilroy
		Proctor's 86th St.	William J. Gilroy James (Jim) F. Thomas Ken Widenor

Continued on next page.

# Appendix

**Table A.1 (Cont.):** Theaters in which community singing was practiced.

State	City	Theater	Organist
New York (cont.)	New York City: Manhattan (cont.)	Rialto	Fred Feibel Hy C. Geis
		Rivoli	Henry Murtagh Harold Ramsay • née Ramsbottom; also Ramsey [sic]
		RKO 86th	Arlo Hults • also Hultz [sic] Jack Ward
		Strand	Frederick Smith Walter Wild
		Warner Beacon	William J. Gilroy
		Warners	Frederick (Fred) Kinsley
	New York City: Queens	Bayside West Victory	Bernard (Bernie) Cowham  Frederick (Fred) Kinsley
		Flushing RKO Keith's (Keith-Albee)	Bernard (Bernie) Cowham Frederick (Fred) Kinsley
		Jamaica Loew's Valencia	John Gart Ted Meyn Joe Stoves "Wild Oscar" (Lloyd Hill)
		Loew's Astoria- Triboro	Egon Dougherty
		Richmond Hill RKO Keith's	William (Bill) Meeder
	New York City: Staten Island	Paramount	"Betty" and "Jean" Don Baker
		St. George	John Hammond
	Niagara Falls	Strand	Betty Lee Taylor • also Bettye [sic]
	Rochester	RKO Keith's	Arlo Hults • also Hultz [sic]

*Continued on next page.*

**Table A.1 (Cont.):** Theaters in which community singing was practiced.

State	City	Theater	Organist
New York (cont.)	Schenectady	RKO Plaza	Dick Hartigan
		RKO Proctors	Bettye Lee Taylor
	Syracuse	Fox Eckel	Paul H. Forster
	Troy	Warner Brothers	Steve Boisclair
	Yonkers	Loew's	Adolph Goebel
Ohio	Cincinnati	RKO Albee	Lee Erwin
	Cleveland	Loew's Park	Emil Koeppel Ted Meyn
		Loew's State	Ted Meyn
	Columbus	Palace	Ray Turner
	Elyria	Capitol	Kenneth Lea
Oregon	Portland	Majestic	Cecil Teague
		Oriental	Glenn Shelley
		Portland	Don Wilkins Iris Wilkins
		Publix	Stanleigh Malotte
Pennsylvania	Allentown	State	Jimmy Daubert
	Beaver Falls	New Colonial	Glenn Hoffman
		Rialto	Franklin Bentel • also Bental [sic]
	Mansfield	Straughn Hall	Charles Darrin
	Philadelphia	Earle	Bob Hamilton Milton Slosser
		Fox	Bob West
		Mastbaum	Stuart Barrie Milton Charles
	Pittsburgh	Loew's Penn	Dick Liebert Lois Miller "Wild Oscar" (Lloyd Hill)
		Warner's Enright	Johnny Mitchell
	Pottsville	Capitol	Russ Kershner

*Continued on next page.*

## Appendix

**Table A.1 (Cont.):** Theaters in which community singing was practiced.

State	City	Theater	Organist
Pennsylvania (cont.)	Scranton	Rialto	Betty Hammond
		Riviera	Betty Hammond
		West Side	Clark Fiers
Rhode Island	Providence	Loew’s State	“Maurice”
Tennessee	Memphis	Loew’s Palace	Arthur Hays
Texas	Beaumont	Liberty	Alice Richmond
	Dallas	Palace	Dwight Brown
	Houston	Metropolitan	Cornelius Maffie Bob West
	San Antonio	Palace	Vernon Geyer
		rKO-Majestic	“Mac” Bridwell
		San Antonio	William (Billy) Muth
		Texas	Earl Abel • also Able [sic] Dwight Brown Leo Weber
Utah	Salt Lake City	Capitol	Francis “Guss” Farney • also gus [sic] Alexander Schreiner
Vermont	Burlington	Flynn	“Brownie” (Art Brown)
Virginia	Charlottseville	Paramount	“Brownie” (Art Brown)
	Jamestown	Winter Garden	Dick Betts
	Lynchburg	Paramount	Ann Melodie
	Richmond	Byrd	“Brownie” (Art Brown)
Washington	Seattle	Fox-Paramount	Larry McCann
		Seattle Publix	Ron Baggot Don Moore
Washington, DC		Stanley-Crandall	Irene Juno
West Virginia	Clarksburg	Ritz	Art Thompson
Wisconsin	Green Bay	Fox	Dan Daniels
		Orpheum	Kenneth (Ken) T. Wright

*Continued on next page.*

**Table A.1 (Cont.):** Theaters in which community singing was practiced.

State	City	Theater	Organist
Wisconsin (cont.)	Kenosha	Fox Gateway	Ray Gruis
	Milwaukee	Garfield	Clarence Bosch
		Milwaukee	Martin Pflug
		Modjeska	Bob Stambaugh
		Riverside	Elmer Bieck
		Saxe's Wisconsin	Edmund Fitch
			Les Hoadley
			Edward (Eddie) Meikel
			• also Miekel [sic], Meikels [sic], Mickels [sic]
			Arthur Richter
			Iris Wilkins
		Tower	Jack Martin
		Warner	Al Gullickson Martin Pflug
	Rhineland	Lloyd's State	Kenneth (Ken) T. Wright
	Sheboygan	Sheboygan	Melvin Peacock

## Appendix

**Table A.2:** Organists who led community singing and the theaters in which they performed, as documented by *Exhibitors Herald* and *Variety*.

Organist	State	City	Theater
Earl Abel • also Able [sic]	Illinois	Chicago	Belmont Congress
	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Paramount
	Texas	San Antonio	Texas
Frank Albanese	New Jersey	Jersey City	Stanley
Joseph Alexander	Illinois	Chicago	Embassy
Edgar Amstein	Illinois	Chicago	Central Park
Walter Anderson	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Madison
Jean Anthony	Illinois	Chicago	Belpark Crystal Granada
Ron Baggot	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Fox
	Washington	Seattle	Seattle Publix
Bob Bailey	Colorado	Denver	Paramount
Edna Merle Bain	Nebraska	Nebraska City	Paramount
Don Baker	New York	New York City: Staten Island	Paramount
Noble Barker	Illinois	Chicago	Avalon
Billy Barnes	New York	New York City: Manhattan	Loew's State
Stuart Barrie	Missouri	St. Louis	Grand Central
	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Paramount
	Pennsylvania	Philadelphia	Mastbaum
Fred Beck	Illinois	La Grange	La Grange
Hal Beckett	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Fox
<i>Continued on next page.</i>			



**Table A.2 (Cont.):** Organists who led community singing.

Organist	State	City	Theater
Bill Bennett	Illinois	Chicago	Belpark
		Evanston	Varsity
George Bent	Colorado	Denver	Orpheum
Franklin Bentel • also Bental [sic]	Pennsylvania	Beaver Falls	Rialto
Ramon Berry • also Raymond [sic]	Illinois	Chicago	Alamo
Lew Betterly	Michigan	Detroit	RKO Downtown RKO Uptown
Dick Betts	Connecticut	New Haven	Roger Sherman
		Stamford	Publix Palace
	Virginia	Jamestown	Winter Garden
“Betty and Jean”	New York	New York City: Staten Island	Paramount
Russell Bice	Michigan	Detroit	RKO Downtown
Elmer Bieck	Wisconsin	Milwaukee	Riverside
Bob Billings	Illinois	Chicago	Crystal
Dessa Bird	Indiana	Indianapolis	Indiana
Steve Boisclair	New York	Albany	Warner Brothers
		Troy	Warner Brothers
Lou Bonder	New York	New York City: Manhattan	Park Plaza
Clarence Bosch	Wisconsin	Milwaukee	Garfield
Brad Braley	Massachusetts	Concord	Capitol
“Mac” Bridwell	Texas	San Antonio	RKO-Majestic
Albert F. Brown	Illinois	Chicago	Granada Marbro McVickers
“Brownie” (Art Brown)	Vermont	Burlington	Flynn
	Virginia	Charlottseville	Paramount
		Richmond	Byrd

*Continued on next page.*

# Appendix

**Table A.2 (Cont.):** Organists who led community singing.

Organist	State	City	Theater
Dwight Brown	Texas	Dallas	Palace
		San Antonio	Texas
Gray Burt	New Jersey	Newark	Westwood
Ted Campbell	Indiana	Michigan City	Tivoli
Eddie Carter	California	Los Angeles	Metropolitan
Milton Charles	Illinois	Chicago	Oriental Tivoli Uptown
	Pennsylvania	Philadelphia	Mastbaum
Bill Cimler	New Jersey	Jersey City	Jersey
Merle Clark	Michigan	Detroit	Capitol Michigan
	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Paramount
Bob Clarke	Michigan	Detroit	Hollywood
Grace R. Clarke	Illinois	Chicago	Crown
Robert G. Clarke	Michigan	Detroit	Hollywood
Carl Coleman	Indiana	Hammond	State
Don Cordon	Illinois	Chicago	Central Park Crown Fox Sheridan Lawndale McVickers
Bernard (Bernie) Cowham	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Madison
		New York City: Queens	Bayside West Victory Flushing RKO Keith's (Keith-Albee)
Ted Crawford	Arizona	Phoenix	Orpheum
	California	Santa Barbara	Granada
<i>Continued on next page.</i>			

**Table A.2 (Cont.):** Organists who led community singing.

Organist	State	City	Theater
Helen Crawford • always Mrs. Jesse Crawford	Illinois	Chicago	McVickers
Basil Crystal • also Basel Cristole [sic], Cristol [sic]	Illinois	Chicago	Tower
Dan Daniels	Wisconsin	Green Bay	Fox
Harold Daniels	Illinois	Chicago	Buckingham
Charles Darrin	Pennsylvania	Mansfield	Straughn Hall
Jimmy Daubert	Pennsylvania	Allentown	State
Paul Davis	Illinois	Chicago	Embassy
Bob Demming	New York	Buffalo	Century
Johnny Devine	Illinois	Chicago	Patio
Egon Dougherty	New York	New York City: Queens	Loew's Astoria- Triboro
Eddie Dunstedter	Minnesota	Minneapolis	Minnesota Publix
John Eltermann	Maryland	Baltimore	Loew's Century
Lee Erwin	Ohio	Cincinnati	RKO Albee
Don Pedro Espinosa • also Espanosa [sic]	Illinois	Chicago	Ambassador Highway
J. Earl Estes • also Earle [sic], Estes [sic]	Illinois	Chicago	Gateway Tower
Francis "Guss" Farney • also Gus [sic]	Utah	Salt Lake City	Capitol
Fred Feibel	New York	New York City: Manhattan	Rialto
Clark Fiers	Pennsylvania	Scranton	West Side
Edmund C. Fitch	Illinois	Chicago	Colony Roosevelt Sheridan Stratford
	Wisconsin	Milwaukee	Saxe's Wisconsin

*Continued on next page.*

Appendix

**Table A.2 (Cont.):** Organists who led community singing.

Organist	State	City	Theater
Hans Flath	Missouri	Kansas City	Loew's Midland
Edgar Ford	Connecticut	New Haven	Roger Sherman
Al Forest	Connecticut	Danbury	Palace
Paul H. Forster	New York	Syracuse	Fox Eckel
Armin Franz	Michigan	Detroit	Fox
Jack Franz	Michigan	Detroit	Fox
Ray Frazee	Massachusetts	Boston	Loew's State
"Hal" Friedman	Massachusetts	Dorchester	Publix Morton
John Gart	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	46th St. Loew's Pitkin
		New York City: Queens	Jamaica Loew's Valencia
Hy C. Geis	New Jersey	Jersey City	Stanley
	New York	New York City: Manhattan	Rialto
Vernon Geyer	Texas	San Antonio	Palace
William J. Gilroy	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Loew's Pitkin
		New York City: Manhattan	Proctor's 58th St. Proctor's 86th St. Warner Beacon
Adolph Goebel	Massachusetts	Springfield	Paramount
	Nebraska	Omaha	Paramount
	New York	Yonkers	Loew's
Glen Goff	California	San Francisco	Fox
Larry Goldberg	Minnesota	Minneapolis	State
Martha Green	California	Los Angeles	Boulevard
Elsie Robbins Gross	Massachusetts	Boston	Loew's State
Ray Gruis	Wisconsin	Kenosha	Fox Gateway
Al Gullickson	Wisconsin	Milwaukee	Warner

*Continued on next page.*

**Table A.2 (Cont.):** Organists who led community singing.

Organist	State	City	Theater
Arthur Gutow	Michigan	Detroit	Michigan Publix Fisher
Doris Gutow	Illinois	Chicago	Stratford
Chauncey Haines	Illinois	Chicago	Norshore
Bob Hamilton	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Fox
	Pennsylvania	Philadelphia	Earle
Betty Hammond	Louisiana	New Orleans	Publix Strand
	Pennsylvania	Scranton	Rialto Riviera
Harvey Hammond	Missouri	Kansas City	Loew's Midland
John Hammond	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Warner Strand
John Hammond	New York	New York City: Staten Island	St. George
Eddie Hanson	Illinois	Chicago	Senate Tivoli Tower Uptown
Dick Hartigan	New York	Schenectady	rko Plaza
"Symphonic" Hawley	Illinois	Chicago	Belpark Covent Garden
Arthur Hays	Tennessee	Memphis	Loew's Palace
Russ Henderson • also Rus [sic]	Massachusettes	Worcester	Plymouth
"Herbie"	Louisiana	New Orleans	Publix Saenger
Milton Herth	Illinois	Bloomington	Majestic
	Indiana	Hammond	Paramount
Mel Hertz	California	San Francisco	El Capitan
Mrs. Maurie Hilbloom	Illinois	Chicago	Stratford
Les Hoadley	Wisconsin	Milwaukee	Saxe's Wisconsin
Glenn Hoffman	Pennsylvania	Beaver Falls	New Colonial

*Continued on next page.*

# Appendix

**Table A.2 (Cont.):** Organists who led community singing.

Organist	State	City	Theater
Floyd Hofmann	Michigan	Menominee	Lloyd's
Al Hornig	Maryland	Baltimore	Loew's Century
Nelson Hosking	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Roosevelt
Edward K. House	Illinois	Chicago	Chicago Granada Harding Tivoli Uptown
J. Virgil Huffman	Illinois	Chicago	Irving
William Huffman	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Loew's 46th St.
Arlo Hults • also Arlow [sic], Hultz [sic]	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Albee Kenmore
		New York City: Manhattan	Chester RKO 86th
		Rochester	RKO Keith's
Don Isham	Illinois	Chicago	Broadway Strand Embassy Granada
"Jackie" (Katherine Kaderly)	Colorado	Denver	Paramount
"Jean" (Eloise Rowan)	Colorado	Denver	Paramount
Jerry Jackson	Illinois	Cicero	Palace
Irene Juno	Washington, DC		Stanley-Crandall
Katherine Kaderly	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Loew's Metropolitan
Henrietta Kamern	New York	New York City: Manhattan	Loew's 175th
Henri A. Keates • also Keats [sic]	Illinois	Chicago	Gateway McVickers Norshore Oriental Paradise Uptown
<i>Continued on next page.</i>			

**Table A.2 (Cont.):** Organists who led community singing.

Organist	State	City	Theater
"Wen" Kennedy	Illinois	Champaign	RKO Virginia
Banks Kennedy	Connecticut	Stamford	Publix Palace
Herb Kern	California	Los Angeles	Metropolitan
	New Jersey	Jersey City	Fox State
Russ Kershner	Pennsylvania	Pottsville	Capitol
Frederick (Fred) Kinsley	New York	New York City: Manhattan	Hippodrome Loew's State Warners
		New York City: Queens	Bayside West Victory Flushing RKO Keith's (Keith-Albee)
Herbert (Herbie) Lee Koch	Iowa	Des Moines	Capitol Paramount
	Nebraska	Omaha	Riviera
	New York	Buffalo	Shea's Buffalo
Emil Koeppel	Ohio	Cleveland	Loew's Park
Rex Koury	Michigan	Detroit	RKO Proctors
		Troy	RKO Proctors
Francis Kromar	Illinois	Chicago	Diversey
George Latch	New Jersey	Hoboken	Warner Fabian
	New York	New York City: Manhattan	Loew's State
Kenneth Lea	Ohio	Elyria	Capitol
Ann Leaf	California	Los Angeles	Boulevard
Esther Leaf	Nebraska	Omaha	Paramount
Clarence Leverenz	Michigan	Kalamazoo	State
Dick Liebert	New Jersey	Jersey City	Loew's Jersey City
	Pennsylvania	Pittsburgh	Loew's Penn

*Continued on next page.*

# Appendix

**Table A.2 (Cont.):** Organists who led community singing.

Organist	State	City	Theater
J. Wesley Lord	California	Los Angeles	Loew's State
	Louisiana	New Orleans	Publix Saenger
	Nebraska	Omaha	World Paramount
Jules Lurey	Illinois	Chicago	Knickerbocker
Harold J. Lyon	Iowa	Ottumwa	Capitol
Bob Machat	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Madison
Con Maffie	New York	New York City: Manhattan	Paradise
Cornelius Maffie	Illinois	Chicago	Admiral
	Texas	Houston	Metropolitan
Stanleigh Malotte	Oregon	Portland	Publix
Max Marlin	New York	New York City: Bronx	Fairmount
		New York City: Brooklyn	Loew's Metropolitan
Arthur Martel • also Martal [sic]	Georgia	Atlanta	Howard
	Massachusetts	Boston	Metropolitan
Jack Martin	Wisconsin	Milwaukee	Tower
"Maurice"	Rhode Island	Providence	Loew's State
Larry McCann	Washington	Seattle	Fox-Paramount
Ray McNamara	Louisiana	New Orleans	Publix Saenger
William (Bill) Meeder	New York	New York City: Queens	Richmond Hill RKO Keith's
L. Carlos Meier	Illinois	Chicago	Terminal
Edward (Eddie) Meikel • also Miekal [sic], Meikels [sic], Mickels [sic]	Illinois	Chicago	Harding Oriental Uptown
	Wisconsin	Milwaukee	Saxe's Wisconsin
Ann Melodie	Virginia	Lynchburg	Paramount
Belle Melrose	Illinois	Champaign	Central Park

*Continued on next page.*



**Table A.2 (Cont.):** Organists who led community singing.

Organist	State	City	Theater
Jack Meyer	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Fox Carlton
Ted Meyn	Missouri	Kansas City	Pantages
	New Jersey	Jersey City	Loew's Jersey City
	New York	New York City: Queens	Jamaica Loew's Valencia
	Ohio	Cleveland	Loew's State Loew's Park
F. Donald (Don) Miller	Florida	Miami	Olympia
	Michigan	Detroit	Michigan Publix Riviera State
Lois Miller	Pennsylvania	Pittsburgh	Loew's Penn
C. (Charles) Sharpe Minor	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Warner Strand
		New York City: Manhattan	Beacon
Johnny Mitchell	Pennsylvania	Pittsburgh	Warner's Enright
Henri Monnet	Montana	Billings	Babcock
Don Moore	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Fox
	Washington	Seattle	Seattle Publix
Henry B. Murtagh	Illinois	Chicago	Chicago
	New York	Buffalo	Hippodrome Shea's Buffalo
		New York City: Brooklyn	Paramount
		New York City: Manhattan	Rivoli
William (Billy) Muth	Iowa	Des Moines	Paramount
	Texas	San Antonio	San Antonio
F. Le Roy Nelson	Indiana	Muncie	Rivoli
<i>Continued on next page.</i>			

**Table A.2 (Cont.):** Organists who led community singing.

Organist	State	City	Theater
Melvin Peacock	Wisconsin	Sheboygan	Sheboygan
Harold (Harry, Hal) F. Pearl	Illinois	Chicago	Sheridan
	New York	Buffalo	Kensington Lafayette
Birge Peterson	Massachusetts	Boston	Loew's State
Martin Pflug	Wisconsin	Milwaukee	Milwaukee Warner
Stanley Pinhero	New Jersey	Newark	RKO Proctor's Palace
William Pond	Michigan	Detroit	State
Charles Possa	New Jersey	Hoboken	Warner Fabian
"Ralph" (Ralph Tuchband)	New York	New York City: Manhattan	Loew's Paradise
Harold Ramsay • née Ramsbottom; also Ramsey [sic]	Minnesota	Minneapolis	Minnesota Publix
	New York	New York City: Manhattan	Loew's Paradise Rivoli
Dena Raphael	Illinois	Chicago	Wallace
Jimmy Rich	New Jersey	Jersey City	Central
Alice Richmond	Texas	Beaumont	Liberty
Arthur Richter	Wisconsin	Milwaukee	Saxe's Wisconsin
Harold Rieder	New Jersey	Jersey City	Stanley
		Newark	Branford
Rosa Rio	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Fox
Ada Rives	Louisiana	New Orleans	Loew's State
Louise M. Roesch	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Warner Strand
Bob Ross	New York	New York City: Manhattan	Loew's Paradise
Eloise Rowan	Minnesota	Minneapolis	Minnesota Publix

*Continued on next page.*

**Table A.2 (Cont.):** Organists who led community singing.

Organist	State	City	Theater
Leonard Salvo	Illinois	Chicago	Harding Highland
Durand Sauls	Florida	Miami	Capitol
George Saunders	Illinois	Chicago	Chelten
Herb Schaffer	Illinois	Chicago	Crystal
Alexander Schreiner	Utah	Salt Lake City	Capitol
Eddie Schwartz	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Bushwick
Walter Seifert	Connecticut	Hartford	Strand
Nelson Selby	New York	Buffalo	Kensington Shea's Bailey
Edna J. Sellers	Illinois	Chicago	Howard Marbro Oriental Uptown
Preston Sellers	Illinois	Chicago	Chicago Oriental Senate Tivoli Uptown
Glenn Shelley	Oregon	Portland	Oriental
Arsene Siegel	Michigan	Detroit	Fisher
"Singing Bill" (Bill Zuckerman) • also Zukor [sic]	Minnesota	St. Paul	Paramount
	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Loew's Kings
		New York City: Manhattan	Loew's 175th Loew's Paradise
Frank Simpson	Connecticut	Torrington	Warner
Milton Slosser • also Steve Slosser [sic]	Indiana	Indianapolis	Indiana
	Missouri	St. Louis	Missouri
	Pennsylvania	Philadelphia	Earle
Frederick Smith	New York	New York City: Manhattan	Strand

*Continued on next page.*

# Appendix

**Table A.2 (Cont.):** Organists who led community singing.

Organist	State	City	Theater
Leonard Smith	Illinois	Chicago	Avalon
McNeil Smith • also Mc Neal [sic]	Illinois	Chicago	Marquette
Bob Soffer	New York	New York City: Manhattan	Hollywood
J. Gibbs Spring	Illinois	Park Ridge	Pickwick
	Indiana	Hammond	State
Bob Stambaugh	Wisconsin	Milwaukee	Modjeska
Eddie Stone	Nebraska	North Platte	Fox
Joe Stoves	New York	New York City: Queens	Jamaica Loew's Valencia
Jack Taylor	New Jersey	Newark	Branford
Betty Lee Taylor • also Bettye [sic]	New York	Niagara Falls	Strand
		Schenectady	RKO Proctors
Cecil Teague	Oregon	Portland	Majestic
Leo Terry	Illinois	Chicago	Capitol Pantheon Picadilly
Tom Terry	Missouri	St. Louis	Loew's State
James (Jim) F. Thomas	New Jersey	Newark	Branford
		New York City: Manhattan	Proctor's 86th St.
Art Thompson	New Jersey	Newark	Ohio Midland
	West Virginia	Clarksburg	Ritz
Elsie Thompson	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Paramount
Earl Thurston	Missouri	Kansas City	Newman
Paul Tompkins	Maryland	Baltimore	Loew's Century
Grenville E. Tompsett	Indiana	South Bend	Granada

*Continued on next page.*

**Table A.2 (Cont.):** Organists who led community singing.

Organist	State	City	Theater
Ray Turner	Illinois	Chicago	North Center
		Oak Park	Lamar
		Rockford	Coronado
	New York	Albany	RKO Palace
	Ohio	Columbus	Palace
Arthur L. Utt	Missouri	St. Louis	Grand Central
Iris Vinning	California	San Francisco	Granada
George Vlach • also Valch [sic]	Illinois	Chicago	Shore
Harry L. Wagner	Illinois	Chicago	Empress
William Walker	Illinois	Chicago	Tiffin
Carroll Wallace	Iowa	Des Moines	Capitol
Ollie Wallace	California	Los Angeles	Los Angeles United Artists
Jack Ward	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Fox Carroll
		New York City: Manhattan	Academy of Music RKO 86th
“Doc” (Louis A.) Webb	Illinois	Chicago	Marshall Square
	Nebraska	Omaha	Rialto
Leo Weber	Massachusetts	Boston	Memorial
	New Jersey	Jersey City	Loew’s Jersey City State
	New York	New York City: Manhattan	Loew’s 83rd St.
	Texas	San Antonio	Texas
Louis Weir	Massachusetts	Boston	RKO Keith
W. Remington Welch	Illinois	Chicago	Tiffin
Gabe Wellner	Illinois	Chicago	North Center
<i>Continued on next page.</i>			

Appendix

**Table A.2 (Cont.):** Organists who led community singing.

Organist	State	City	Theater
Bob West	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Fox Paramount
	Pennsylvania	Philadelphia	Fox
	Texas	Houston	Metropolitan
Frank White	New Jersey	Newark	Branford
Ken Widenor	Missouri	Kansas City	Newman
	New Jersey	Hackensack	Fox
	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Warner Strand
		New York City: Manhattan	Proctor's 86th St.
Walter Wild	New York	New York City: Manhattan	Hippodrome
			Strand
"Wild Oscar" (Lloyd Hill)	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	rko Albee
		New York City: Manhattan	Loew's 175th
		New York City: Queens	Jamaica Loew's Valencia
	Pennsylvania	Pittsburgh	Loew's Penn
Don Wilkins	Oregon	Portland	Portland
Iris Wilkins	Oregon	Portland	Portland
	Wisconsin	Milwaukee	Saxe's Wisconsin
Charles Williams	New York	New York City: Manhattan	Loew's State
Don Williams	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Marlboro
Sammy Williams	Illinois	Chicago	Regal
Johnny Winters	Colorado	Pueblo	[theater unknown]
	New York	New York City: Brooklyn	Warner Strand

*Continued on next page.*

**Table A.2 (Cont.):** Organists who led community singing.

Organist	State	City	Theater
Lee Woodbury	New Jersey	Hackensack	Oritana
Floyd Wright	California	Berkeley	Fox California
Kenneth (Ken) T. Wright	Michigan	Menominee	Lloyd's
	Wisconsin	Green Bay	Orpheum
		Rhineland	Lloyd's State
Dale Young	Indiana	Indianapolis	Fountain Square Indiana Publix Circle
Harry Zimmerman	Illinois	Chicago	Belmont

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