

The RTOS Story

As told by the following brief history, the Rochester Theater Organ Society (RTOS) story is one of inspiration, luck, near failure, community involvement, perseverance and untold hours of dedication and hard work by an unstoppable band of enthusiasts and volunteers, all having the common goal of saving an important piece of Rochester's musical history through the preservation and presentation of a magnificent Wurlitzer theatre pipe organ.

RTOS Story - In the Beginning

In the beginning there was an organ, a theatre, and an organist. Wurlitzer Opus 1951 was built at the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company factory in North Tonawanda, NY in the summer of 1928. At that time the 2916-seat Keith-Albee Palace Theatre (later renamed RKO Palace) was well on its way to completion on Clinton Avenue North and Mortimer Street in Rochester, NY. A native of Great Britain, Tom Grierson had experience playing organs in St Louis, Brooklyn and Buffalo, and eventually settled in Rochester. Here he had held several church organist positions and played engagements at several local theatres before being retained to play at what would soon become Rochester's most beautiful movie palace. Tom custom designed the organ, a 4-manual, 21-rank, 'special' which was probably shipped by rail to Rochester on September 12, 1928. Installation took three months and local lore suggests that due to Tom's close relationship with Wurlitzer (he recorded many organ player rolls for them) and since Rochester was only a short distance from the factory, that the organ was the recipient of voicing and regulating services not afforded most Wurlitzer installations.

The Palace Theatre opened on Christmas Day 1928 with Tom Grierson at the console, a position he would hold for fifteen years. Coming at the tail end of the silent era, the organ never accompanied films, but was used for spotlight solos, sing-a-longs and thousands of radio broadcasts. Over the years many others played the Palace organ, the most famous being Jesse and Helen Crawford who appeared there during Easter week, 1934. One of the twin consoles from the neighboring Piccadilly (later Paramount) Wurlitzer was brought over and wired into the Palace instrument so they could play the duets they had become famous for. Use of the organ continued well into the 1940s until vaudeville and other live shows at the Palace had ended. Then to cut costs the console was lowered into the pit and the organ was silenced and would remain unused through the rest of the 1940s and throughout the '50s.

RTOS Story - A Man and A Vision

In the spring of 1960, long time Floridian Daniel (Danny) Schultz, an Engineer moved his family to Rochester. Having previously rescued, restored and installed a Wurlitzer in his home in Florida, he had been fortunate to meet and work with a former Wurlitzer organ installer of the period when they were being installed in theaters. Art Stopes was still active, had an organ building/ maintenance business and became a mentor to Danny's hobby efforts. After the move to Rochester, Danny began searching for info on what organs remained in local theaters. A visit to a local music store, *Music Lovers Shoppe* resulted in meeting Tom Grierson.

Tom said the Palace organ was somewhat playable but needed considerable work to bring it back to good playing condition. Also Tom also introduced Danny to local enthusiasts Jess Littlefield and Lloyd Klos who were to become his team members in the RKO Palace organ restoration.

Tom was instrumental in paving the way with RKO to allow access and restore the organ due to his many year associations with Jay Golden, the RKO District Manager. After permission was granted by Jay Golden and theater manager Frank Langkamp, Danny moved ahead with the project by enlisting the aid of his wife Oline, along with Jess and Lloyd, they began the job of returning the Mighty Wurlitzer to playing condition. Fortunately, the instrument had escaped major water damage and the misdeeds of those who would do it harm with the exception of the pilfering of the brass saxophone rank sometime in the 1950s. Working nights and weekends, often while the show went on, the little band worked diligently and quietly in the organ chambers for several months until the organ was played publicly for the first time in some 17 years by Tom Grierson in a mid-August Sunday morning concert in 1960.

With appetites whetted by articles in the local press and occasional television reports, Rochesterians who remembered the organ from its heyday emerged from the woodwork as they brought their families and friends downtown to once again revel in the beauty of the still opulent RKO Palace (the building was only 32 years old in 1960) and cheer as the gleaming white and gold console rose majestically from the pit at occasional informal concerts held during the next few years.

RTOS Story - RTOS is Born and Disaster Strikes!

Emboldened by the enthusiastic response of the attendees to the ninth annual American Theatre Organ Society Convention to hear Reginald Foort's electrifying performance at the Palace in 1964, a number of the people responsible for restoring the organ and promoting the informal concerts determined to start a local organization which would present monthly concerts and educational programs. Without further delay a plan was put into motion, documents were prepared and on August 6, 1964, the Rochester Theater Organ Society was founded. Enthusiasm was high and the founders wasted no time setting up administrative offices and committees and turning their dream into a fully functioning organization. On September 19, 1964 the first formal concert was presented as local organist Don Scott, protégé of Tom Grierson, became the first official RTOS artist to ride the console into the spotlight before an audience of 400 delighted listeners. Thus began Season One of RTOS concerts, a tradition which is unbroken 50 years later and reigns as the longest-running and arguably the world's most successful uninterrupted theatre organ series.

Interest, attendance and membership rolls grew rapidly as local organists Dean Robinson and Alan Ross completed the 1964 schedule in October and December. The team took a break in January of 1965 but concerts resumed on February 27th with Harvey Elsaesser doing the honors followed by regional artists Alan Mills in March and Don Kinnier in April. By now the future of RTOS appeared to be secure and spirits were soaring in anticipation of the planned May 23rd appearance by famed *Radio City Music Hall* organist Ashley Miller. What could possibly go wrong?

On the evening of March 2, 1965, Society members were shocked to read the Times Union's

front-page headline: “*Palace Will Give Way to Two 18-Story Towers.*” The Palace Wurlitzer, the very core of the Society’s existence was being threatened.

RTOS Story - Rochester Responds!

At a meeting at the Palace on March 13, 1965 it was agreed that the organ must be saved and remain in Rochester. A goal of \$10,000 was set and fund raising began in earnest. Fund-raising concerts were scheduled, \$1 and larger shares of stock in “musical nostalgia” were sold to the public, rummage and bake sales were held, and production of a pictorial booklet about the Palace and an LP record featuring Don Scott playing the organ all helped in the fundraising efforts. Newspaper and TV publicity and an informational booth in the then bustling Midtown Plaza focused attention on the cause. These efforts, along with a number of substantial private donations all contributed to the realization of the funds needed to purchase the organ and remove it to safe storage during the search for a new home.

The organ was heard in its original home for the last time on July 21, 1965 when the "golden era" again reigned for one memorable night in Rochester. The RKO Management and RTOS co-sponsored “A Glimpse of the Past”, a vaudeville-movie show done in the style of the 1930s. Local Radio/TV luminary Eddie Meath was the master of ceremonies for a five-act stage show, complete with an orchestra in the pit. Don Scott rose into the spotlight to play the organ in the Palace for the last time to a near capacity house. On August 2nd, with *Von Ryan’s express* starring Frank Sinatra, on the screen, the marquee lights were turned off and the RKO Palace, “Rochester’s Most Beautiful Theatre”, just five months shy of its 37th birthday, closed its doors forever.

In the months following the announcement that the theatre would close, negotiations took place and RTOS arranged to purchase the organ for \$6,000. While this was a goodly sum in 1965 dollars, it was also known that organ brokers with deep pockets had their eyes on Opus 1951, who would skim off the 'good stuff' and then junk the remains. Due to its near perfect condition it was a prime candidate. However, RTOS was determined to preserve this important piece of Rochester’s history, here, and intact for the enjoyment of future generations. RKO Regional Manager Mr. Jay Golden who shared this interest, managed to keep the brokers at bay while he quietly arranged the deal with RTOS. Without his help, RTOS would have slipped into oblivion and ‘our’ organ most assuredly would no longer be in tact or Rochester today.

RTOS Story - Looking for a New Home

A diligent search was quickly underway to find a suitable new home. Numerous sites were scouted to no avail. Then, local organist David Cordy, who played the numerous pipe organs located in the huge Masonic owned Temple Civic Center located on East Main Street approached RTOS with an idea. The building, built in 1929 included the 2564-seat art deco Auditorium Theatre which housed a seldom-used 1929 E.M. Skinner concert organ. Dave suggested, and the Masons accepted a proposal by RTOS whereby the Skinner would be replaced by the Wurlitzer and under a long-term lease agreement RTOS would transfer legal title of the instrument to the Masons and in return maintain it for use for concerts produced by the Society along with Masonic and other public events.

During August of 1965 RTOS volunteers carefully removed the Wurlitzer to temporary warehouse space donated by Bausch & Lomb. The organ was no sooner gone than the wrecking balls and the bulldozers arrived and by the end of 1965 the RKO Palace was reduced to a parking lot. The 'twin towers' project fizzled and the site remained a parking lot until 2012. The E. M. Skinner organ was professionally removed and sold to a local Church where it was reinstalled and remains in regular use to this day.

The Auditorium's chamber spaces on either side of the proscenium were cleaned, carefully measured and plans were drawn to make the extensive alterations that the Wurlitzer would require. As soon as the chambers were constructed the task of re-erecting opus 1951 in its new home began in earnest with all work being done by RTOS volunteers. Because the instrument was in near pristine condition and had been carefully removed and stored the installation went relatively smoothly. Work continued throughout 1966 and was substantially completed by the end of the year.

Despite the loss of the Palace and near loss of the organ, RTOS never skipped a beat. Fundraising concerts and other social events were held throughout the year to keep interest alive. Artists performed on a number of local historic instruments including the historic original installation Hope-Jones Opus 2 at the First Universalist Church along with several other local church organs and a Kimball theatre pipe organ installed in local member Jim Webster's machine shop. Other programs included Don Baker and Dick Smith performing on electronic instruments at the Auditorium.

By January of 1967 installation work was completed. The organ components, pipes, percussions, chests, regulators, tremulants, relays, console and blower had been cleaned, repaired and renewed as necessary then reunited in substantially the same configuration as the original installation. The missing Saxophone rank had been temporarily replaced by Danny Schultz using a Vox Humana rank which he rescued from the Webster Avenue Theater while the organ was still in the Palace. Eventually that Vox Humana would be moved to a new chest increasing the rank count to 22 and a Post Horn rank occupied the Saxophone chest for the next 35 or so years, until a replacement brass Saxophone rank was obtained.

It had been a huge gamble. The enthusiasts who flipped the switch in 1960 had come a long way. An army of volunteers had given their time and talents to the cause. Money was raised and spent, contracts were signed and a lot of sweat equity had been invested. Would it work? How would it sound in another theatre? Would people return to hear the Wurlitzer without experiencing the lavish surroundings of the RKO Palace?

RTOS Story - The Golden Years

During January of 1967 the finishing touches were applied, wind pressures were set, pipes were adjusted and tuned and a host of 'little things' were attended to. The plan had been to have Tom Grierson play the opening concert but unfortunately he had passed away in 1966 while the organ was silent. So, on Saturday, January 21st, 1967 at 8:00 P.M., Don Scott, a former student of Tom's, ascended into the spotlight to inaugurate the new life of Wurlitzer Opus 1951 in its new home to the nearly full house of enthusiastic Rochesterians as they once again thrilled to the sounds of the Palace's Mighty Wurlitzer.

Following the debut of the organ RTOS membership grew rapidly. With a family membership that covered two adults and their minor children costing a mere \$10 per year, RTOS quickly became known as Rochester's undisputed best musical value. Most concerts were free for RTOS members, (a policy that is still in effect 50 years later) and many were free for all attendees. For 'public' concerts, admission tickets for the general public were usually priced at \$2.00 per person. Rochesterians attended en masse with attendance often approaching the 2,000 mark.

By the end of 1967, ten more artists had graced the RTOS bench. The list of luminaries included Eddie Weaver, Jack Ward, Billy Nalle, Don Kinnier, Allen Mills, Lyn Larsen (age 22) and Reginald Foort. Featured artists who made their first appearances at the Auditorium in 1968 included John Muri, Rosa Rio, George Wright, Kay McAbee and Ashley Miller.

It is significant to note that George Wright made a total of six appearances under RTOS auspices between 1968 and 1979 and was named the society's 6th Honorary Member at his fourth appearance in November of 1972. The RTOS Wurlitzer was, in fact, one of a very few organs outside of California that George would consent to play during that period and he considered it to be "the finest Wurlitzer in a public venue - anywhere"!

In an age when only a handful of theatre organs were fully functioning in public venues, word of RTOS' success spread quickly throughout the theatre organ world and one after another, nearly all of the 'biggies' were invited to come to Rochester to experience the hospitality, the large enthusiastic audiences and the superb instruments that RTOS provided. Such has been the case for fifty years. Over the years many fine theater organs, venues and organizations have come into being. Audience size and interest among the general public has waxed and waned. Those who remember the organ in the RKO Palace are few. Our membership which peaked at nearly 1800 in the early 1980s is less than 400 today. We probably will never see another audience of the 2,000+ that attended George Wright's last appearance in 1979. By the end of 2014 RTOS will have produced more than five hundred concerts, silent film festivals, pizza parties, student concerts, dance parties and other events utilizing our two Wurlitzers. The roster of the more than 200 artists who have performed for RTOS is a veritable who's-who of theatre organists, past and present. The \$10 membership is but a distant memory. For 2015 a family membership will cost \$65 and will still admit two adults and their children to eight concerts. Of the RTOS pioneers named or referred to above, Don Scott still resides in the Rochester area and continues to occasionally attend RTOS concerts. Charter member Richard Neidich visits Rochester frequently and currently serves on the RTOS Board of Directors. Another early member who had helped remove then reinstall the organ, Roger Wood, is still active as a director

and is still a very active member of the 4/23 work crew. Last but not least, Dan Schultz, the man with a vision who started the ball rolling in 1960, currently resides in Arkansas and along with his sons plans on attending our 50th Anniversary Gala in October. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to them and others too numerous to mention for their foresight and perseverance.

RTOS Story - RTOS Expands its Resources

The years have generally been kind to RTOS. Once the organ from the RKO Palace was securely reinstalled in its new home and our highly successful yearly series of concerts was well established our work crews were ready for a new challenge. In the early 1970s several RTOS members purchased Wurlitzer Opus 1492, a 3-manual 8-rank 'special' that was originally installed in 1926 in the Capitol Theatre, Worcester, MA. It was brought to Rochester for an intended commercial installation that never materialized. Consequently the organ languishing in storage for several years as the owners sought out a new home for it

Located in Rochester's prestigious East Avenue Preservation District, the *Rochester Museum and Science Center* (RMSC) was expanding its campus in the early 1970s to incorporate portions of a recently acquired former private girl's school adjacent to the museum property. Included was the former gymnasium/auditorium which was to be remodeled into a 400 seat multi-purpose auditorium and exhibition facility. RTOS member Don Hall, who had moved to Rochester to become the first Director of the RMSC's state-of-the-art Strasenburgh Planetarium in 1968, realized that the new Eisenhart Auditorium would be an ideal home for this instrument. Don approached the RMSC and RTOS with his idea. All parties agreed and RTOS bought the instrument from the investors, fully refurbished it then installed it in the building. Don acted as liaison, aiding the architects in the design of the new chamber spaces. The organ debuted in a series of concerts held during Columbus Day weekend of 1978 with Don Scott once again doing the honors.

As had been the case with the Palace organ, the Eisenhart instrument was 'sold' for \$1 to the RMSC and a long-term lease/use agreement was put in place. Now increased to 12 ranks plus piano, the pipework was reregulated in the mid 1990s by Clark Wilson and Brant Duddy to make the most of the room's acoustics. The resulting sound is that of a nicely voiced mid-sized studio instrument. We often begin programs there by welcoming the audience to the "RTOS Living Room". The organ is used on a regular basis for open console sessions (free and open to all RTOS members), silent film festivals and other community and social events. For two seasons in the late 1990s, all RTOS concerts were held at the Eisenhart while the console of the 4/23 was being refurbished.

Over the years ownership of the Masonic complex and the Auditorium Theatre has changed twice and it is currently Rochester's home for touring Broadway shows and other touring productions under the auspices of the current owners, the *Rochester Broadway Theatre League* (RBTL). RTOS regained title to the organ when the Masons left and currently maintains it in the building under an agreement with the current owners. RBTL has made many improvements to the theatre and maintains it in first class condition. RTOS enjoys an excellent relationship with our landlords who continue to enthusiastically support our efforts and make it possible for our concert series to continue.

Throughout its history, RTOS has worked diligently to protect and maintain our two instruments. We have faced numerous challenges at the Auditorium due to water incursions (twice) and building alterations necessary to accommodate the Broadway shows. In every instance we have cleared these hurdles with flying colors.

RTOS Story - The Next 50 Years

Where do we go from here? RTOS maintains two world-class Wurlitzers. Both instruments are in excellent condition and installed in well maintained secure buildings. In each instance RTOS enjoys a positive relationship with the management of the facilities. We have much to be both proud of and thankful for. While most of the organists from the golden era are now gone, new generations of talented artists continue to discover the magic of the theatre organ and perform for us.

RTOS is doing its part to keep the music playing. Each February for the past eight years, in a collaboration with the Eastman School of Music, students from the *Department of Organ, Sacred Music, and Historical Keyboards*, chaired by RTOS Director David Higgs, who have expressed an interest in playing the Wurlitzer have performed a concert for the RTOS audience. Known as The Eastman Bunch, this unique program has inspired several students to further their skills in mastering the theatre organ.

However, RTOS is currently experiencing many of the same challenges faced by other organizations similar to ours. Declining membership and escalating costs are causing us to carefully scrutinize our operations in hopes of containing these costs. For 2015 we have elected to eliminate one concert per year. While this will help to some degree, we realize that we must rebuild our membership and develop new sources of revenue to sustain operations in the coming years.

RTOS has had a proud and successful 50 years and we look forward to our 100th anniversary.

This updated and expanded version of the RTOS Story was created and edited by Russ Shaner and includes material written by Lloyd Klos and others that has appeared in previous RTOS publications. The Editor thanks Don Hall, Richard Neidich and Dan Schultz for supplying additional information.

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