

Bob Mitchell...

A Los Angeles Original

By Jim Henry



Bob Mitchell at the Orpheum Wurlitzer.

When Bob Mitchell made his first appearance as a theatre organist at age 12, silent movies were in first run and the Orpheum Theatre was still on the drawing boards. The date was December 25, 1924. It was quite a novelty to have a child organist, so the manager of the Strand Theatre in Pasadena, California invited Mitchell to play Christmas carols on their Style 185 Wurlitzer between shows. He quickly advanced to playing for the pictures about five times a week until the talkies ended his motion picture career in 1928.

Mitchell was well prepared to take the bench. He began piano lessons at age four and, with strict discipline by his mother, practiced intently and advanced rapidly. While his parents didn't approve of the movies, he managed to occasionally get to see movies with his playmates on excursions from his hometown of Sierra Madre to neighboring Pasadena. He recalls being entranced by the glorious music accompanying the movies. He reminds us that back then people didn't think of the accompaniment as anything unusual because that was just the way movies were always shown.

His mother bought an abandoned Harmonium to give Bob his introduction to the organ. He recalls that his mother spent a dollar for the instrument, and his father spent \$10 to have it hauled home. Bob was allowed to play the organ as a treat, after he had completed an hour of piano practice each day. This gave him an opportunity to develop his improvisational skills.

Mitchell studied organ with Ernest Douglas, the organist at the Mission Playhouse Theater in San Gabriel, California and founder of the Los Angeles Chapter of the American Guild of Organists. The theatre had a small Estey home organ to accompany *The Mission Play*, which ran for many years. Douglas soon had Mitchell playing at the Playhouse, on those days when he didn't want to do the job himself. (The Mission Playhouse is now the San Gabriel Civic Auditorium, and home to a Style-260 Wurlitzer, which will be heard during the 2005 Convention.) Bob also sang in Douglas' boy's choir.

With jobs for organists in movie disap-



Mitchell's teacher, Ernest Douglas, seated at the Estey organ at Mission Playhouse Theater in San Gabriel, California. (December 17, 1928)



Bob at the console early in his career.

pearing, Mitchell found other outlets for his considerable musical talents. At age 16, he took a position as a church organist and choirmaster. He became the youngest Fellow of the AGO, when he was 18. He then went on to study piano at the Eastman School of Music, and later the New York College of Music. At this time he had his own radio program as a singing pianoman.

Mitchell returned home in 1934 when he father became ill. He was appointed organist at St. Brendan's in Los Angeles, a post he held for 55 years. There, he undertook what was to become his most celebrated accomplishment when he organized a boy's choir, eventually to be known as the Mitchell



Bob Mitchell directs his choir in "Blondie in Society" (1941).



Bob accompanying a silent movie.



Bob

Choirboys. In 1937, the choir was cast in their first of over 100 motion pictures, *That Girl From Paris*. They are best remembered for their role as Bing Crosby's backup group in many of his movies, such as *Going My Way*. Bing described them as "the best choir in the world." During these years, Bob also performed as a radio and television organist on numerous programs including *Art Linkletter's House Party*.

In 1962, both the Dodgers, and the Angels baseball teams chose Mitchell as their organist, making him the only "player" to play for both major leagues at the same time. During these years he appeared in a number of events for the newly founded Los Angeles chapter of the American Theatre Organ Enthusiasts. The 1965 "Christmas at the Wiltern" performance featured Bob at the 4/37 Kimball console, the largest ever built by Kimball, and the Mitchell Choirboys singing Christmas music. (Restoration of the

Kimball was the first project undertaken by LATOE. The Kimball was removed and sold for parts when the theatre closed in the late '70s.)

Bob remains active as a performer. In 1995 he returned to the role of silent movie accompanist at The Silent Movie Theatre, a Hollywood cinema that has been showing silent movies exclusively since 1942, where he still performs on a regular basis. In an unusual engagement, Bob accompanied a screening of Valentino's *Blood and Sand* at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery, site of Valentino's crypt, to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the actor's death. The movie was projected on the side of a mausoleum. He also performs regularly at the Founders' Church of Religious Science 4/31 Wurlitzer.

Bob has a legion of devoted fans. Over 1,100 filled the downtown Palace Theatre to capacity to celebrate Bob's 90th birthday. The guest list included keyboardist Ray

Manzarek from The Doors and comedian Eddie Cantor, a regular fixture on the Orpheum Theatre circuit. It was a 'working' party for Bob, who ended the evening by accompanying the Buster Keaton film *Seven Chances*.

The Los Angeles Chapter is pleased to present Bob Mitchell accompanying the silent movie *Wings* at the Los Angeles Orpheum Theatre during the 2005 ATOS 50th Anniversary Convention. The screening of the first picture to receive the Oscar for Best Picture, from a beautifully restored 35mm print on the Orpheum's state of the art projectors, promises to be a delightful conjunction of three Los Angeles originals . . . the original-installation Wurlitzer, in the restored to original condition Orpheum, in the hands of the last original Los Angeles silent movie organist, Bob Mitchell.



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