

## Leroy Shield's Music for the Wurlitzer 165 "Crossovers"—Sharing our Hobby

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It is obvious to any collector of automatic music—especially street, band and fair organs—that much of the enjoyment we get out of our hobby is the sharing of our collections with the non-collector public. It is also true that only a fraction of our organization's membership is able to attend our numerous rallies, no matter how wide spread their locations may be. This is one reason why independent events where we may perform and opening our collections to visitors are such important parts of our hobby.

When an event from another organization that is near and dear to one's heart comes along, it is especially gratifying to share our COAA interests as circumstances allow. It is fun for everyone involved, and it may even lead to new COAA memberships. COAA members here in Minnesota routinely open their collections to visitors, but it seems that the most appreciative audiences are those that are themselves collectors of some sort. I think of these people as "crossover" groups. Ralph Schultz of Belle Plaine has had several Model T clubs arrive in caravans of the Tin Lizzies to enjoy his hospitality, and Bill Nunn of Hamel has a veritable parade of visitors, among them the Twin Cities Laurel and Hardy club and assorted carousel enthusiast groups. These folks often seem more pleased with the band organ experience! They are crossover people, with interests in old or historic things who tend to have a natural interest in other old, historic activities.



Figure 1. Leroy Shield.

Just such an occasion arose recently with the release of Wurlitzer 165 roll number 6846. This newly commissioned roll is made up of 14 selections written by the little-known composer Leroy Shield. I say little known, for like most composers of motion picture scores, Shield's name is not remembered, but his music is unforgettable! Leroy Shield's compositions are as well known as those of the music from "Gone with the Wind" and "The Wizard of Oz," and like their scores composers, his name is virtually unknown (**Figure 1**).

Leroy Shield wrote most of the endearing melodies which make up the musical background on the early 1930s comedies of Laurel and Hardy and the Our Gang/Little Rascals, along with other wonderful short subjects from the Hal Roach Studios (**Figure 2**)



Figure 2. Hal Roach, circa 1929.

Glenn Thomas of Princeton, New Jersey commissioned the organ roll for his Wurlitzer 165/166 organ, and the talented music roll arranger Rich Olsen of San Diego, California, transcribed the tunes from the recordings of The Beau Hunks Orchestra. Since very little of Leroy Shield's music was ever published, and most of the orchestral scores have long since disappeared, the Dutch band transcribed the music from the soundtracks of the Hal Roach comedies themselves.

Leroy Shield began working at Hal Roach Studios when The Victor Talking Machine Company was contracted by Roach to convert the studio to sound. Shield, Victor's director and repertoire man for the western half

of the United States, went to the studios as part of the package. From 1929 to early 1931 he went on to write at least 68 melodies for the studio that have become such an endearing part of our memories.



Figure 3. Charley Chase.

These melodies were originally composed by Shield for specific scenes in specific comedies. One tune, *Little Dancing Girl* was first used in the 1930 Charley Chase two-reeler, “Girl Shock”, when a pretty young girl appeared on screen (Figure 3). The editors at the studio soon discovered that they could insert the prerecorded tunes

into any comedy using the extensive library of melodies compiled by Shield. *Little Dancing Girl* would be used in nearly every film when a pretty little girl would appear. *Beautiful Lady* would be used as the title implies, but often, in an inverse inside joke, when a homely woman was depicted! The songs were reused in countless comedy films, and Leroy Shield received no additional pay for the recycling of his compositions, a fact that did not sit well with the composer, although there is no record of his ever taking action against Hal Roach Studios for the infringement. In fact, Shield returned to the studio on two occasions to score prestigious Laurel and Hardy feature films, 1933’s “The Devil’s Brother” and 1936’s “Our Relations” (Figure 4). These two films were the only time Shield received screen credit for his work. He did appear on camera one time, in a three-reel Thelma Todd and ZaSu Pitts comedy, directing a live orchestra playing his own music in a nightclub sequence (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Oliver Hardy (left) and Stan Laurel.



Figure 5. ZaSu Pitts (left) and Thelma Todd.

Rich Olsen’s arrangements of Leroy Shield’s compositions capture the spirit and joy of the original recordings. The music roll begins with the quintessential Our Gang theme, *Good Old Days* (Figure 6). The following tune is *Let’s Face It*, from Laurel and Hardy’s “Our Relations.” Shield’s signature tune *Little Dancing Girl* is next, with *Streamline Susie*, *Beautiful Lady*, *On to the Show*, *Bells*, *Riding Along*, *Look at Him Now*, and *Dash and Dot* following, all Leroy Shield standards. Next comes the bluesy jazz theme *Blue Blue*, with the perennial favorite *The Moon and You* and the Latin-influenced *Antics* preceding the final tune, an up-tempo reprise of *Good Old Days*, complete with a fanfare finale.



Figure 6. Our Gang in late 1931 (from l to r): George “Spanky” McFarland, Bobby “Wheezer” Hutchins, Dorothy “Echo” DeBorba, Kendall “Breezy Brisbane” McComas, Sherwood “Spud” Bailey, Matthew “Stymie” Beard, and Pete the Pup.

The occasion that allowed this crossover interest was the 4th Annual Leroy Shield Film Festival in his birthplace town of Waseca, Minnesota, on Friday, October 8th, 2010. The fun began before the program in the courtyard outside of the city's CIS Auditorium where COAA member Ralph Schultz's Stinson 47 band organ merrily played the new music roll of Leroy Shield selections. The fourteen tunes delighted the audience as they arrived for the evening's presentation, and impressed the planners of the event who were a little skeptical of the last minute addition of the band organ concert to the festivities. Needless to say, they are now sold on the value of band organ ballyhoo (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Standing in front of the "Stinson 47" band organ are Leroy Shield Film Festival coordinators Jack and Mary Williams, organ owner Ralph Schultz, and Block-Heads Grand Sheik Tracy M. Tolzmann, both COAA members. The instrument merrily played the lilting tunes composed by Waseca, Minnesota native son Leroy Shield.

Making the arrangements to have the roll played publicly at the Shield hometown event was no small task. Mike Merrick brought the existence of the roll to my attention in early September when Glenn Thomas announced its availability via Mechanical Music Digest e-mail. Oddly enough, Mike had only recently been talking to Bill Nunn about the idea that it would be great if Shield's music was available for band organ. Knowing of Bill's interest in the Shield music, I called him hoping he would order the roll for his 165-playing Mortier organ. I was delighted when he told me that he already had the roll and that it was quite good!

I arranged a meeting with Bill, and Mike and I made the pilgrimage to the western Twin Cities suburbs to hear the Shield organ roll for ourselves. We were not disappointed. My immediate question for Bill was, "Could you bring the organ to Waseca on October 8th?," as I was set to introduce the program for the 4th Annual Leroy Shield

## A Leroy Shield Biography

Leroy Shield was born in Waseca, Minnesota on October 2, 1893. He showed an aptitude for music at an early age and made his professional debut as a pianist at 12. By 1907, the Shield family was living in Iowa and their living room was converted into a music studio where Leroy, his mother, and sister all gave music lessons. By age 15, Leroy was acclaimed as a music composer, arranger and concert pianist.

Leroy graduated from high school in 1910 and won a scholarship in piano at the Columbia School of Music in Chicago. He also studied at the University of Chicago. By 1916, Leroy was teaching piano in Oak Park, Illinois. In 1917, duty called and Leroy entered the army. His Selective Service registration card notes "left eye useless without glasses," which explains why he spent WWI with a baton in his hand as director of an army band.

In 1920, Leroy was living in Des Moines, Iowa, and teaching organ and piano, and in 1923, he toured the country as accompanist for a popular mezzo-soprano. At this time, Leroy specialized in the playing of works by Ravel, Stravinsky, and Schönberg.

The Victor Talking Machine Company hired Leroy as a pianist and musical director for Victor recording sessions in 1923, and from 1926 to 1929 he was the director and repertoire man for the western half of the United States. From 1929 through early 1931, Shield worked for Victor at Hal Roach Studios.

In late 1930, Shield began work as a conductor with the National Broadcasting Company in Hollywood. By June of 1931, Shield's work with NBC brought him to San Francisco, then Chicago, and eventually New York City, where he became manager of orchestra personnel. Shield was conductor of the NBC Concert Orchestra and the NBC Summer Symphony, arranged music and directed orchestras for several NBC radio programs, and had his own NBC radio show, Roy Shield and Company.

Shield retired from NBC in 1955, remaining on the payroll as a consultant. He moved to Fort Lauderdale, Florida in 1956 and died there at the age of 68 on January 9, 1962.

Film Festival, and I thought it would be ideal to have the band organ playing the roll as the audience arrived, (even though no mention of the concept had been conveyed to the event's producers). To my chagrin, Bill informed me that he would not be able to attend, but he graciously offered to loan the roll to us, suggesting that perhaps Ralph Schultz and his 165-playing Stinson 47 would be available.

Checking with Ralph the next day, his interest was peeked, his fee was low (miniscule, in fact), and his calendar was clear. This left making the arrangements with the Shield event planners. Fortunately, I have been involved with the celebration since its inception in 2007. As “Grand Sheik” (president) of the Twin Cities Laurel and Hardy fan club, the Block-Heads tent, I have been invited as a guest speaker for the occasion. A phone call to Jack and Mary Williams in Waseca was met with a little resistance as the event was just around the corner and no advance publicity was afforded the special new attraction. I hung up the phone with some disillusion, but e-mailed the Williamses with some addition background information on band organs and the roll, and offered to subsidize a stipend for Ralph if they chose to proceed with the idea.

I was thrilled the next day when my e-mail contained a message from the Williamses saying they had decided to contact Ralph and make arrangements for him to bring the Stinson 47 for a pre-program Leroy Shield concert. They added that my enthusiasm was contagious. Need I say that I love Leroy Shield’s music and love band organs, too? What could be a better combination?

The crowd was thrilled with the addition of the Leroy Shield band organ music, and the Williamses and their

committee were glad for my persuasive suggestion to use the newly available music. They did manage to get a photo of the Schultz’s organ in the local paper that week which helped bolster attendance, and arrangements have been made with Ralph to participate in Waseca events in 2011, so the crossover interests continue.

Ralph enjoyed the Shield music so much that he has ordered his own copy of the roll. I urge anyone who loves the great two-reel comedies of the Hal Roach Studios and has a 165-playing instrument to follow Ralph’s lead. Hearing the music can’t help but bring a smile to your face and a memory of Stan and Ollie or Spanky and the Little Rascals to your mind! Rumor has it that Glenn Thomas has enough Rich Olsen arrangements of other Leroy Shield tunes to release a second roll if sales of the first edition are sufficient. With Olsen’s excellent arrangements and Shield’s lilting, unforgettable compositions, you can’t lose!

The first four tunes on the roll may be enjoyed on YouTube. The “Wurlitzer 165-166” band organ playing the music is owned by Glenn Thomas. To view the instrument, go to the following address:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMj6duvFJ4o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMj6duvFJ4o).

Tracy M. Tolzmann is a member of the COAA and the crossover groups the Block-Heads tent of the Sons of the Desert, and the T-Totalers chapter of the Model T Ford Club International. He lives with his wife Merrie in Sunrise, Minnesota, birthplace of actor Richard Widmark.

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