

## *Prtljaga's Organ*

### **An Interview with John Prtljaga**

One of the nice sounding organs at our COAA rallies is the 75-key organ constructed by John Prtljaga of Barberton, Ohio. **Photo: back cover.** A short interview, by the Editor at a recent rally in Waynesville, Ohio revealed interesting facts about John and the organ.

- Editor: *John, can you tell me the story of your self-built organ?*  
John: *I began building the organ around 1990. It was intended to be of the Wurlitzer 165 style. I built the pump first and then followed by making pipes and the case.*  
Editor: *Yes, I can remember seeing the organ for the first time at the initial COAA rally in Trolleyville, 10 years ago. The organ sounds a lot different now, though.*  
John: *As time has progressed I have enjoyed listening to Kevin Sheehan's Dutch organ and some of the Dutch music from Larry Kern's Stinson organ. At first I didn't think I could get that sound from my organ but after several modifications I have been able to do that.*  
Editor: *When did you make these changes?*  
John: *I started making changes about four years ago following a rally in Marietta, Ohio.*  
Editor: *John, this seems to be a full organ—how many pipes does it have?*  
John: *It has two sets of bass pipes; two sets of counter melody and accompaniment; six sets of 23 melody pipes (three are in the Forte register) and two sets of bourdon flutes. It also has a set of heavy jazz flutes in the back for a total of 279 pipes.*  
Editor: *What changes did you make to bring out the Dutch sound?*  
John: *First I added the bourdon flutes. Then I lowered the bass notes from a low C to a lower G. This adds fullness and more body to the sound. Of course, the new arrangements by Wayne Holton complete the changeover.*  
Editor: *Are you through changing the organ?*  
John: *No, I will continue to add more ranks, especially violin celeste in the melody and the bourdon flutes in the counter melody. I will probably end up with 17 register controls when done.*  
Editor: *John, one last question: how did you get into making your own organ?*  
John: *Well, I played drums as a child. When I was 15, I began building guitars and eventually made four of them. I worked on a player piano and later attended an organ rally in Ashtabula, Ohio. There I met Cliff Pollock, Bob Stanozek, Steve Lanick and then Ken Smith. It just seemed to take off from there. Ken helped me a lot. I have worked as a mechanic and welder and that has helped with my skills in making the organ.*

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### ***North Tonawanda: Rare machine ensures Wurlitzer sound for years to come!***

#### **Neale Gulley\***

A retired 42-year Napa Auto parts worker recently became, as a hobby, conductor for what may be the world's oldest band. The outfit, like other similar players still scattered across the country, is bellows-blown and powered by a crankshaft. And though it sometimes consists of about three trombones, 16 flutes, as many violins and orchestra bells, 15 trumpets, a bass and a snare drum, the whole ensemble would fit easily into the back of a pickup and sounds as good as it did in 1925 providing it's property oiled.

It's Rudolph Wurlitzer's famous automatic band organ and Douglas Hershberger is rolling his way into the director's chair to usher a

new generation of Wurlitzer's legacy in North Tonawanda. He is one of the few known operators of the only known machine still capable of producing perfect copies of the perforated paper music the great band organs need to function.

There are other ways to produce the rolls discontinued by Wurlitzer in 1945, but not with the kind of original quality Hershberger achieves using his 100-year-old machine, once housed in the factory, and a trove of about 2,500 original Wurlitzer "master" rolls, each about 200 feet of ancient oaktag and accounting for just one song apiece.

The smaller rolled paper cartridges he

\* Courtesy of *The Tonawanda News*, July 2, 2009

produces are made by combining tunes from several master rolls (many of which are nearly 100 years old) to make custom song lists for owners of the nation's remaining band organs. "What we make here are band organ rolls, all of them that were made in the United States were made here in North Tonawanda by about five different companies. The best known of which, being Wurlitzer, stopped making them in 1945," he said.

Hershberger taught himself how to operate the machine since it was obtained by the Herschell Carrousel Factory Museum several years ago and has for about three years been selling his original reproductions out of a display shop housed inside the museum at 180 Thompson St.

The reproductions are capable of making the old band organs sing exactly as they were intended, with the same kind of mechanical and musical precision as the classic wooden carrousels the city is famous for, and for which the band organs played a central part.

Now housed at the museum for which he is a trustee, the musical copy machine appeals to collectors and connoisseurs far and wide as a source for reproducing the old paper rolls the classic organs use to play: carnival-like melodies redolent of a bygone era, when the circus or carnival was a cutting edge mainstay of entertainment for the masses.

The requests have been coming in faster than Hershberger can fill them.

"You may not recognize a band organ if you were leaning up against one but you'd know the music," said Hershberger, a dedicated music reproduction specialist and also a trustee at the museum. "It's carnival music, merry-go-round music, circus music," he said.

In other words, if a movie director or recording artist wants you to think of that bygone era near the turn of the 20th century, when barkers wore top hats and Coney Island was the place to be for an entire generation, they'd use a band organ, probably a Wurlitzer at that. "We have a couple of amusement parks that use them, most notably Knoelbels Grove (in central Pennsylvania). They have at least 10 band organs down there," he said.

And although the dotted paper rolls it converts to music on several mechanized drums and a clockwork chorus of horns can be reproduced in other ways, the nuances of Hershberger's reproductions are historically

intact. That's because he uses the only original copy machine known to exist. Since Wurlitzer and everyone else stopped producing the rolls, Hershberger's machine is a treasure of finely tuned gears and sprockets capable of making new paper music cartridges off the yellowed and worn originals. It preserves the master collection since it can make as many as about 10 copies at a time.

Hershberger demonstrated an earlier player organ built before 1900 at a presentation of the equipment held at the museum Wednesday evening. The ancient Vermont-made organ was fitted with a giant wooden cylinder full of nails and turned with a crank, like a giant version of a child's music box. The paper rolls are a similar concept, but were a huge "innovation" after the turn of the century, he explained.

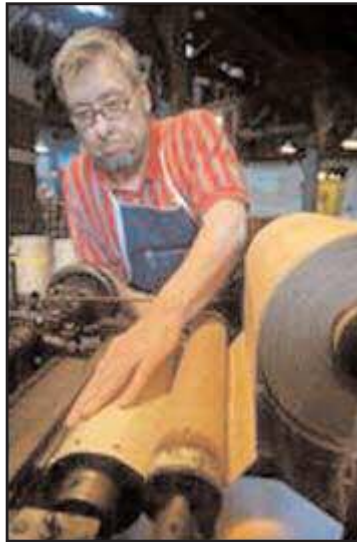
"The beauty of the roll as opposed to the barrel organ is that it is cheap and easy to make," he said. Easy is a relative thing, however, and a surgeon's attention is required to keep the irreplaceable master rolls (many of them at least 80 years old) from being torn to shreds by the machine for any number of mechanical reasons.

But when it's not temperamental, the equipment is an impressive example of mechanical perfection, clicking and whirring as rhythmically as the music it is preserving with each copy Hershberger makes.

Even those without a vintage band organ of their own gave the process rave reviews at Wednesday's presentation: "I used to think a windup watch was complicated," Jack Love, who has taught technology at Buffalo State, said after studying the machine in action. "It's fascinating, the engineering of it ... the fact that everything is timed and runs," said Bob Miller of Cheektowaga who has for the past two years demonstrated wood carving alongside Hershberger at the museum.

Out of three sizes of paper used to compile several songs at once for use on remaining organs around the world, Hershberger said he can produce music for about three different models of band organs and a player piano. They sell for between \$30 and \$65 each and can take many hours to produce.

"It's very much needed income for the museum and some of these people want 10 at a time and others say they'll buy anything I make," Hershberger said.



Doug Hershberger attending a master roll in the roll-copying machine.