

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.*

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

