

You ain't heard nothin' yet

Bill Carter, a Middletown organist

By **Carol Child**
Correspondent

You ain't heard nothin' yet. That was the sound that shook Hollywood the evening of October 6, 1927. The movie was, of course, *The Jazz Singer*, the first feature length film to use recorded song and dialogue. Before the talkies, a live orchestra, pianist or organist accompanied the films.

Bill Carter has played the Baldwin Cinema organ at the Everett Theatre for 45 minutes before nearly every movie since he attended a foreign film series there 13 years ago. He had just gotten married and his wife, Terri, wanted him to go with her to an event she attended in Washington, D.C. "Instead, he went to the Everett with an ex-girlfriend," Terri says. Now, after 13 happily married years, Terri bubbles with laughter at the scene; but at the time, it seemed they had started down the aisle on the wrong note.

Meanwhile, back at the Everett, Bill spotted the organ and discovered, when he asked Ellen Combs Davis about it, that it wasn't being played. Davis, the driving force behind the

Everett's restoration for 25 years until her death on Easter Sunday 2006, invited him to play. And so he began, playing until the Everett's ceiling collapsed in March 2008. He will continue once the Everett restoration is completed.

"Our goal is to open December 7, the theatre's [86th] anniversary," says Elizabeth Barbato, owner of Purple Sage Herbs, next to the theatre, and board of directors film chair for Associated Community Talents, Inc. (ACT), the nonprofit overseeing the fundraising for the theatre. Fortunately, when the ceiling collapsed, the organ was not damaged.



Photo by Carol Child

Bill Carter

Carter has a kind of a wizard's knowledge of the workings behind an organ's stops, pedals, pipes and keyboard. And that's good, because every time he uses hands and feet to play all the bells and whistles on the Everett organ, he is surrounded by kids asking a lot of questions. "Theatre organs are very different from electronic organs that play a lot of the parts for you," he says. "You play with both hands and both feet and change the stops to alter the registration."

When he's not at the Everett, Carter performs on electronic organ and has played many of the significant theatre and concert organs in the area. Those he hasn't he can tell you about. He can tell you practically anything you ever wanted to know about organs and sound. There's the electric theatre organ he had with two Leslie speaker cabinets made just for that instrument – famous for Hammond B3 organs that rock bands use. "The electric theatre organ had a stop -- in theatre organs called the tibia – creating a full theatre sound and it had the best electronic tone generation for tibia in electronic organs," he says.

"It produced a sound that's amazing. It uses lights rather than electronic switching and the more stops you pull out, the brighter it gets."

Bill Carter grew up listening to organ records on his parents' Web Core record player in their living room. At 13, he began taking lessons on his family's Wurlitzer spinet organ from a musician he says was an old classics guy, playing

scales, using the Churney system.

In a few years, Carter began studying with jazz organist Paul Richardson, who passed away last year. Richardson is best known as the Phillies organist, playing for them since 1970, and is credited with introducing the one-line, six-note "Charge!" Richardson also played organ for TV commercials, led the Paul Richardson Orchestra and performed at numerous events and venues.

Carter and Richardson used to sneak into the black jazz club in Wilmington, the Club Baby Grand. The former club at Ninth and Poplar drew name performers such as Stan Getz, Dinah Washington and Jimmy Smith, a pioneering force in jazz organ. "Paul was full of excitement," Carter says. "Afterwards, he'd say 'Look, this is what they were doing.' For Paul organ playing was an adventure."

Carter studied with "Melody Mac" (Leonard McClain), too, calling him the last of the real theatre organists.

At 16, Bill Carter got his first performing job at Katie's Spaghetti House at Sixth and Scott streets in Wilmington. Next, he worked at the Gewehr Piano Company in Wilmington, and later at the Wilmington Piano Company. He held odd gigs, played at parties and substituted for Richardson. During those same years, between 19 and 25, he played the Farfisi portable organ in a band called The Bastilles. Their top-45 hit on the local charts was on the

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jukebox at the Charcoal Pit.

Around 1966-67 he did sound for high school record hops with huge speakers.

Bill Carter played the Lansdowne Theater organ, a Kimball 3Manual/8Rank, in Lansdowne, PA. This ornate 1927 movie palace has led a life parallel to that of the Everett, but has remained closed since 1987 when it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places while The Historic Lansdowne Theater Corporation, a nonprofit, raises funds to restore and reopen it. The organ, water damaged, was restored and now is enjoyed in a private home in Mississippi.

Carter played the Dickinson Kimball Theatre Organ, too. Installed at Dickinson High School, near Stanton, DE, in 1968, now restored and enhanced, this organ came from the Boyd Theatre at 19th and Chestnut streets in Philadelphia. The Art Deco Boyd opened in 1928 and closed in 2002. In 2008 the National Trust for Historic Preservation listed it as one of the nation's 11 most endangered historic sites. The Friends of the Boyd have rallied to raise funds to save it.

Riffling through his mental ranks of historic theatre and classical organs existing locally, Carter notes the Classic Aeolian organ – a large, versatile player organ built in 1894 using rolls and able to play an entire score -- at Granogue, the du Pont estate, where it is housed in the basement but its music is heard on the ground floor; the Longwood Gardens hybrid with classical and theatre organ stops; the 1885 tracker organ at Old St. Paul's Church in Odessa; and the 1892 Haskell tracker organ at Forest Presbyterian Church in Middletown. The tracker organ is a type of pipe organ.

The world's largest fully functioning musical instrument is the Wanamaker organ, restored completely and played daily. Carter hasn't played this one, although he has sat by the console up in the Philadelphia Macy's store gallery while the organist played it. This orchestral concert organ that started life at the St. Louis International Exposition of 1904 has multiple keyboards, 729 stop-control tablets, and 462 sets of pipes, ranging from 32 feet to less than an inch long. It would take too many hours of practice, Carter says, to learn how to play it, because some of the pipes are spread across both ends and multiple rooms and floors off the store's grand court, effecting, as you might imagine, a delay between what the organist plays and what he hears. "It's disconcerting," he says.

Carter hopes to devote more time now to educating kids about the organ. In early 2008 he retired after 23 years as a New Castle County deputy sheriff where he served as Public Information Officer for the Community Services Department involved with publishing the county magazine and advertising events.

Bill Carter holds a theatre degree from the University of

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Delaware. His interest and expertise play across the spectrum of photography, sound, storytelling and carbon-arc projectors. Carter is an accomplished professional photographer. He owns Carter's Family Photos -- families, weddings, pets, special events -- in North Wilmington.

His interests began at 9 when he took a Brownie box camera on a trip to Washington, D.C., and grew when at 13 he began taking the bus to the Ace Theater on Maryland Avenue in Wilmington, gone now. Carter vividly recalls those Ace Theater days and the carbon-arc projector, like that at the Everett. He could get in free by going through a side door leading up the narrow staircase to the projection room where Pop Weaver, the projectionist, let him sit on a high metal stool and look out through the slit windows. "Projection windows had metal slides affixed above apertures, suspended by chains that would meet a link and a plate would drop down and confine fire, easily ignited when the carbon-arc flame met the acetate film," says Carter. Weaver introduced him to WOR radio and thereafter Carter loved listening to Jean Shepherd, the great American writer who spun yarns on what is called the talk radio of the late '50s and early '60s.

Carter shoots videos as well as 3-D photography using a vintage 1950s View-Master camera -- last year completing

a project for the Rockwood Museum in North Wilmington. Incidentally, View-Master was developed by William Gruber, an organ maker and avid photographer who lived in Portland, Ore. Carter advises and works on projects with Lou DiMieri, "Dr. Lou," founder of Delaware Ghost Hunters and the East Coast Society of Paranormal Encounters. Carter shoots parallel worlds videos including "Phantoms of the Opera House," about the haunting of the Smyrna Opera House and Smyrna Library (view it at www.youtube.com/intheupperroom) and a paranormal investigation of historic Abbott's Mill in Milford, DE, along with a video update on the Everett Theatre (see these two at www.youtube.com/internetwebtv).

For the past three years, Carter has been designated official photographer for the Stowe, Vt., Area Association's Annual Stowe Weekend of Hope for Cancer Survivors and their families, held the first weekend of May. Watch this video at www.youtube.com/weekendofhope.

As for the Everett, "The architect has done the renditions. The ceiling and the seats still need to be replaced," Barbato said in an August interview. "We need money."

Meanwhile, Carter practices on his theatre organ at home.

But, come the reprise, when the Everett doors swing open again, when kids and parents file in and take their seats, Bill Carter will pull out all the stops, filling the auditorium with melodic harmonies and a cacophony of sirens, drums, castanets and car horns. You ain't heard nothin' yet.