

I met George Wright in 1977 in the ballroom of the Palmer House Hotel in Chicago as part of the ATOS convention that year. We shook hands on that occasion, but it was brief. I really met George in 1982 when the Motor City chapter engaged him to play a concert on the Redford theatre 3/10 Barton. Many of us wondered if George would even consider playing such a "small" instrument. Certainly he did and to this day many long time members consider that concert the best the organ ever sounded.

For years prior we had heard various reports of Mr. Wright's attitude towards organ enthusiasts, especially young organists. In my experience he was pleasant to anyone who wasn't a stark raving lunatic--or on some kind of ego trip of their own. On that first visit, and every meeting we had after, George was very cordial to me. We discovered a mutual liking for French impressionist painting, a subject George knew in great depth. He enjoyed the company of people who didn't engage in 100% "organspeak" all the time, people with varied interests. George was an astute observer of people and their character, and offered me what I consider to this day to be good advice on the subject.

Classic and antique cars have been both a lifelong passion and a profession for me. While taking part in the 1985 Meadow Brook Concours D' Elegance I spotted a familiar name listed among the distinguished Judges. Mr. Strother McMinn, long time instructor of automotive styling at the Art Center College in Pasadena, CA. Art Center College is considered the leading school of automotive styling in the world. Strother MacMinn was an instructor at Art Center from 1948 until the mid-1990s, and in that time he shaped two generations of automotive stylists. He started as a protégé of Frank Hershey (whom I also knew) and in 1936 Hershey brought him east to Detroit when the older man went to work at General Motors as head of the Buick design studio. While at GM Hershey and MacMinn were sent to Germany, where Strother ("Mac" to his friends, including George Wright) designed the 1938 Opel Kapitän. Mac's students are a virtual "Who's who" of automotive styling, and virtually all the directors of styling studios for the last generation have been students and disciples of "Mac". He established Toyota's American styling studios in southern California in the 1970s. A prolific author, MacMinn wrote several articles for Automotive Quarterly, and illustrated the famous J.L Elbert book "Dusenbergl, the Mightiest American Motor Car" in 1951.

My younger and infinitely less cluttered memory instantly recalled that he wrote the wonderful liner notes to the "George Wright Live at the Rialto Theatre" LP. I located him in that crowd of 10,000+ people and introduced myself by saying "I believe we have a mutual friend in George Wright". Well, that brought about a huge grin; he thrust out a firm handshake and we began a wonderful friendship that moment. For the next half hour he told the story of his friendship with George, which started in 1942.

It seems that while serving in WWII "Mac" was rather smitten with a young lady named Cathy, who worked as a receptionist at the San Francisco studios of KFRC radio. She mentioned this crazy SOB of an organist who worked there. This tall fellow kept running from the studio to the stairs, down the stairs for a while, then came flying back up the stairs to get to the organ console in just enough time to go "live" on the air. As it turns out there was a "gin mill" on the first floor of the building that KFRC occupied. It featured a Hammond organ and the organist was...George! His broadcast duties fulfilled, the trio enjoyed numerous cocktails, closing time came and George suggested they wander over to the Fox theatre for more music. Off the threesome went, the cleaning people let them in and George proceeded to hold forth at the Wurlitzer, while Kathy, a trained dancer, took to the empty stage and danced to the strains of George at the Fox Wurlitzer while "Mac" sat doubly enraptured in the fifth row.

Further visits to KFRC studios brought about guided chamber tours which George was only too eager to conduct. As he was stationed nearby, it was easy for airman McMinn to visit the Fox for George's intermissions. At the conclusion of World War II Mac resumed his career with General Motors in the Buick styling studios. Tiring of the four-season Midwest, and longing for home, Mac took a job as instructor at Art Center College in his hometown of Pasadena. There were trips on behalf of the school to New York, and on his first trip Mac was walking down Times Square one day and noticed a familiar name on the Paramount theatre marquee. Thinking there couldn't be TWO organists with the name George Wright he purchased a ticket, sat through the feature until intermission and heard this former acquaintance issue forth the most fantastic music on that legendary instrument. A visit by the stage

door brought about a quick rekindling of their friendship. Mac confirmed the previous accounts of George's public reception at the Paramount--that his snappy, vibrant playing was wildly received. George was treated as a minor celebrity amongst the theatrical and musical communities working and living in Manhattan in this era. Mac reported that just about any one might pop into George's dressing room at any moment.

The two men lost contact as friends sometimes do. Sometime in 1954 the local newspaper ran an article on Mr. Strother McMinn, a "local boy does good" sort of thing. George, who was back in California working for Don Lee television, saw the article, got Mac's phone number through information and called him up to catch up on things. When the topic of discussion turned to the tremulated arts George replied "I've been playing on this box of whistles over in Baldwin Hills, you should come over there some time". This of course was the Vaughn residence, and Mac availed himself to George's offer on many occasions--including several recording sessions. I asked Mac if he was present for any of the Hi-Fi label recording sessions, he answered promptly that he was in the room for the "Flight to Tokyo" and "George Wright's My Fair Lady" sessions.

Fast forward to the early sixties-- another friendly phone call. George proudly announced that he had his own organ right there in Pasadena. Mac was a frequent visitor to the Pasadena studio and recalled vividly New Year's eve ushering in 1966, a party at the studio where liquor flowed in profusion, dancing, carrying on and general insanity ensued. Mac woke up there New Year's day with a severe hangover, no watch and no wallet. This was also the decade of the Rialto theatre concerts mentioned before. Mac said by then the two men stayed in touch, almost always a happy birthday call, a card or letter.

In the early eighties George invited Mac over to his new home in Hollywood to see his new "box of whistles". That hot Michigan summer day I realized that this individual was present at each of George Wright's landmark organs, the instruments that formed his considerable reputation--some seemingly by fate! As we continued to talk I realized that I was meeting a shy, warm, richly intelligent gentleman--In the very literal meaning of that over, and misused word. Here we were in the middle of what the rest of the year is a golf course, and Mac would not litter it with his cigarette butts, snuffing them out and placing them in his back pocket! The biggest "bombshell" that he verbally dropped that day was that his personal favorite organist was Buddy Cole. Mac loved the sense of lost or "impossible" romance that buddy elicited from our favorite instrument. Mac made one comment about George that spoke volumes about Mr. Wright's personality traits-- "you know, George is always testing the friendship" I knew Gorge enough by then to know what he was saying. Before we parted company that day I brashly invited Mac to come hear me at the nearby pizza parlor where I played. He diligently took the directions, then explained that he was visiting with former GM chief stylist Bill Mitchell the following day. I felt he was extremely polite in taking this information from me, but would probably prefer to spend time with a living legend of his profession.

Lo and behold the next evening he came in, enjoyed a pizza and was quite laudatory towards my playing-- especially ballads. He saw to it that my musical diet consisted of lots of Buddy Cole, via cassette tapes he would mail to me. We met several times after that initial visit, usually before the Meadow Brook Concours in August or the Detroit auto show in January. After a fine meal we would go in my car to one of the local theatres and I would play for Mac's appreciative ears. Fast forward to 1995; Mac came to Detroit for the Concours as usual, and we met for dinner. He announced to me that this would probably be the last Meadow Brook Concours that he would be judging, due to two strokes he had suffered earlier that year. Mac then told me he was getting his affairs in order, and wanted to know if I would like to receive his collection of organ records. I answered yes, and they arrived in the mail some time later. They consisted of the GW hi-fi records, an almost pristine copy of "Let George do it" (the 3rd in my collection) some of the Dot releases, and even a few of the old King label NY Paramount studio releases-- ALL AUTOGRAPHED--each bearing warm wishes from Wright. There were 6 or so Buddy Cole records, including "Modern Pipe Organ" as well as Buddy's great Hammond records. I saw George in Portland Oregon for the 1988 ATOS convention, and all of a sudden my association with his old friend MacMinn raised my status with him by a few notches. George listed every car he had owned, the ones he wished he had kept, and shared his version of some of Mac's stories of the two of them.

Since that last visit Mac and I kept in touch occasionally, usually via the mail. In May of 1998 as my (then) fiancée and I watched the last episode of "Seinfeld" the telephone rang. It was one of my theatre organ friends, asking if had heard the news about George's passing that week--I hadn't. A profound wave of sadness came over me. George had always been there--even when he chose not to perform on the theatre organ, and now this void in our musical lives. The following morning I listened to the radio while getting ready for work. The news came that Frank Sinatra had died the previous night. This came as quite a double whammy to me. I came to appreciate Frank Sinatra years ago for perfection in phrasing, and the complete mastery of the emotion in a song. George was his equivalent on our instrument of choice--strange that they should pass so concurrent to one another. I attempted to call Mac to discuss George's passing, and got no answer. I kept trying for the next couple of days, but there was no answer. Sometime that week I was going through some of the many antique car magazines we received at work. The Auburn-Cord-Duesenberg club newsletter had an obituary for Mac--he passed away on Jan.19, 1998 from a massive stroke while recuperating from an automobile accident. The obituary and all other tributes I read in subsequent publications reiterated the same kindly, professional warm human traits Mac exuded, and the respect and care that his legions of students had for him.

I feel richer in my appreciation of theatre organ to have heard George Wright live in concert 6 times, and to have shared drinks, dinner and conversation with him. I'm extremely grateful for Frank Sinatra's unmatched interpretation of the great popular songs, having seen him perform live over 10 times. But I am profoundly thankful that I shared 13 years of wonderful, warm friendship with Mr. Strother MacMinn.