

THE GENIUS OF GEORGE WRIGHT

By William Coale, Ph.D

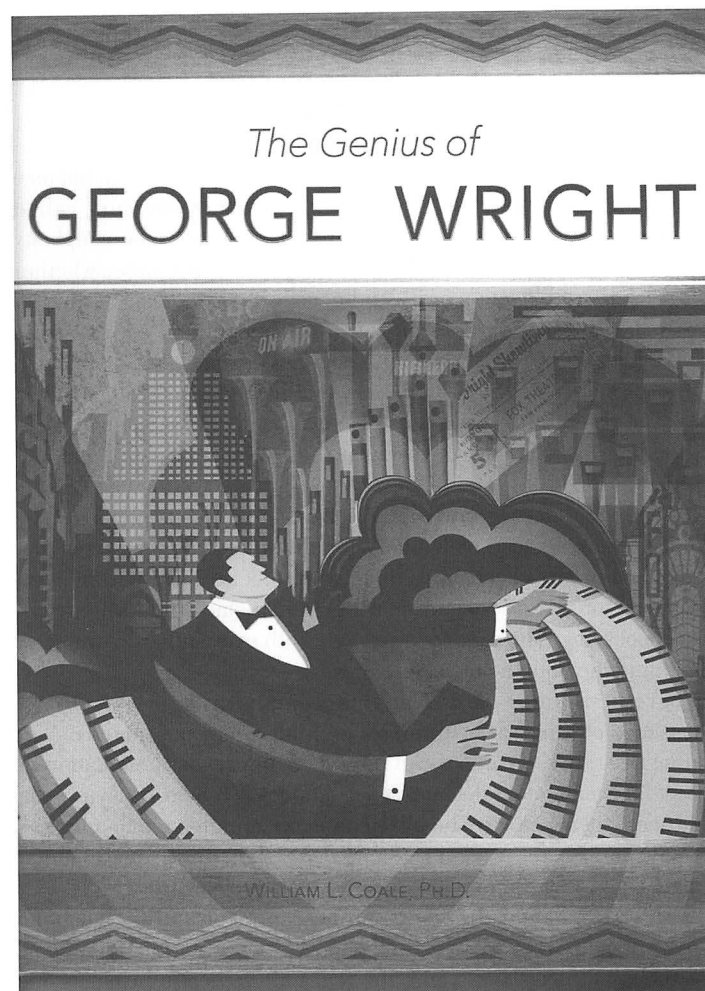
Book review by Jonathan Kleefield, M.D.

I never had the opportunity to meet or hear George Wright in person. My connection began via a set of LP records that my dad, a physician and amateur theatre organist, purchased in the late 1950s at a Radio Shack store in New York City. I still have that set, which came in a box and, ironically, has an electronic organ on its cover. Inside were a number of records, some with the “HiFi” label and others labeled “Life Series.” No booklet or other explanatory notes were included. I had no idea that these records arose from one defunct manufacturer, but what was contained within those grooves startled my dad and me with the remarkably high quality sound and extraordinary musicianship of the organist. Yes, we were “hi-fi bugs,” and of course, having such wonderful records to enjoy musically and also to showcase our pretty impressive (for the time) home-made sound system more than justified the purchase!

Now, nearly 60 years have passed, and some of the mysteries of that record set have been revealed in the form of a simply amazing book by Dr. William Coale, *The Genius of George Wright*. As an ATOS member, I, like many other readers of the Journal, have been eagerly awaiting the publication of this volume, whose progress updates have been provided by Dr. Coale at several ATOS conventions. I can assure you that the wait has been worth it. Physically, the book is imposing, being nearly 600 pages long. It is large in format, and printed on very high quality glossy stock. As a result, it is quite heavy, and after reading it, will reside on our coffee table to share with others.

At the outset, I will say that while I refer to the subject of this book as “George,” this is not meant as a sign of disrespect. To some of us, including me, “George” could be a translation of “God,” given that his efforts have spawned a form of almost religious devotion to the art of the theatre organ. This designation is in no way meant to minimize the contributions of Jesse Crawford, and the many other fine theatre organists and contemporaries of George, as well as those that succeeded him, some of whom receive due recognition in Dr. Coale’s book.

The volume begins with an introduction by Lew Williams, of Organ Stop Pizza fame, and which is a finely composed summary of the life of an individual who was, at the least, mercurial in temperament but blessed with a prodigious musical talent. As Mr. Williams indicates, George did not choose to leave us with an autobiography. However, thanks to Dr. Coale’s substantial research, he has amassed a truly voluminous amount of material, from family photos to countless other memorabilia, which serves a foundation for a thorough compilation of George’s activities throughout his life.



From this extensive treasure trove, the reader is led into the story of a man who came from a humble family, and then sustained a meteoric trajectory into the “big time” of the musical world and allied entertainment media, most notably radio and television. It is to George’s particular credit that he was able to achieve fame at a time when the theatre pipe organ was losing its popularity, due to the advent of sound motion pictures in the late 1920s. Of course, part of that fame was achieved through his work with electronic instruments, including solo performances and those with some pretty famous “sidemen,” including guitarist Tony Mottola.

The book’s format consists of eight chapters, each of which is meticulously footnoted. A particularly valuable part of the text: at the end of each chapter are “time lines,” which help the reader to establish continuity for the many events that are chronicled. Following the text are collections of photos, some of a personal nature, but others of many of the schools, theatres, and broadcasting facilities in which George worked. Of course, there are many photos of the organs George played or participated in their design and construction, and a few pictures included fellow organists, such as Gaylord Carter, Ashley Miller, Eddie Dunstedter, Ray Bohr, and even Virgil Fox.

The first chapter reads like Genesis in the Old Testament. We receive a very detailed treatise on George's forebears on both his father's and mother's sides of the families. Sadly, George was the product of a very dysfunctional family. When George was quite young, his father left with his brother, Elbert, after an attempted reconciliation with his spouse failed. Eventually, George's father committed suicide.

George quickly displayed an aptitude for music, and took his first piano lessons from his mother, Lulu, in their home in Orland, California. He was devoted to her throughout her life. George was at the opening of the San Francisco Fox in 1929, but it was Inez McNeil, an organist at the California Theatre in Stockton who apparently was a pivotal musical force in George's life, and consented to give the wide eyed youngster extensive organ training in the early 1930s.

Throughout the book, Dr. Coale indicated that while George had amazing musical talent, he was well aware that additional musical education would be of help. In that light, he secured lessons and lived for a time with Floyd Wright, from San Francisco, and much later on, studied with none other than Jesse Crawford, after the latter ceased to be the legendary New York Paramount Theatre organist. Copies of some of Mr. Crawford's sheet music are beautifully reproduced for the reader's delight, including handwritten annotations, perhaps of Jesse's, on them.

It appears that the teenager was recognized as a rising musical star and was recruited to Grant Union High School in Sacramento by the principal, William Rutherford, whose own academic career came to a sorry end because of irregularities in his accounting practices. From Dr. Coale's notes, it appears George did little to further his own non-musical studies at the school, but under the guidance of a Mr. Fred Wood, an experienced organ technician, became skilled in this discipline. Shortly thereafter, he became custodian of the school's theatre organ, which blossomed into a most remarkable instrument.

Very interesting, in terms of understanding George's character traits, are numerous letters from George to Mr. Otto Schoenstein, whose well-regarded San Francisco firm was involved in the servicing and some installation of components of this organ. The tone of these letters bespeaks a most confident, if not arrogant individual, who had no compunctions about demanding much of people far more senior to him, in terms of their position in the organ world and their demonstrated capabilities. He even tried to bargain with Mr. Schoenstein regarding the prices of some of those parts and services! Dr. Coale provides superb documentation of the history of the Grant Union High Wurlitzer, and many fine photographs of its original Kilgen console, designed by George.

Following the formative years in Stockton, George got his first independent employment, though under age, at the New Shanghai Restaurant in Oakland, which boasted burlesque entertainment. George played both a Hammond and later a Style D Wurlitzer—he said the dancers preferred pipes! George moved to San Francisco and quickly became a popular organist on several local radio stations.

Dr. Coale carefully records the many activities at these venues, including George's often less-than-laudatory comments about the organs he played, aside from a fine Wurlitzer purchased

for the proverbial song from a Hollywood studio. Of course, it was in the City by the Bay that George had his first experience playing the 4/36 Wurlitzer at the legendary Fox Theater. Once again, Dr. Coale provides ample material to give the reader a sense of what those remarkable activities must have been like to experience. It is a testament to the talent of George Wright that he could draw large crowds for concerts, sometimes in the wee hours of the night. Later chapters deal with the legendary final Fox concerts in the 1960s. A recent two-part Journal article by Edward Millington Stout III also provides an illuminating, lively discussion of those memorable events at the Fox.

It was this notoriety that provided the springboard for George to move in the 1940s to New York City, again for a mixture of playing for radio programs with NBC, and later, as the featured organist of the New York Paramount, following the departure of Don Baker. Dr. Coale provides remarkable insight into George's activities in the theatre. He had no scruples about altering the organ, already considered the "Mother Wurlitzer," and meticulously maintained by Dan Papp. For example, he took the Post Horn from the upstairs studio instrument and added it to "Mother," feeling it would give an even more brilliant reed ensemble. This constant "tinkering" was one of George's ongoing musical and performance traits. His activities at the Paramount diminished, due to the management feeling that attracting "big names" such as Frank Sinatra and Martin and Lewis, would improve attendance. Seeing his activities undergo forced attrition, he left the cold and ice of New York City, which he detested, back to sunny California.

The relationship of George to Richard Vaughn is described in detail, including Mr. Vaughn's run-in with the law—this, due to unscrupulous activities defrauding military veterans who were buying used cars from him and being charged extortionist levels of interest. Because of these practices, Mr. Vaughn served a brief period of time in San Quentin. (This is one venue in which George never played a concert!)

It was Vaughn who bought and installed the five-manual Chicago Paradise Theatre organ in his living room, and then began broadcasting concerts from that location. Initially, it was Gaylord Carter who served as organist, but George joined him in this effort, and then began the historic relationship with Vaughn's nascent HiFi Records label. The discs produced were those my dad bought years later at Radio Shack, as well as by thousands of other hi-fi enthusiasts. The relationship between George and Mr. Vaughn soured, not surprisingly over money issues, leading to their parting company.

George also established an initially very fruitful relationship with Don Leslie, whose rotating speaker revolutionized the electronic organ business. Leslie generously funded what became the Pasadena Studio Wurlitzer, including the performance space itself, from which many fine recordings were produced. George and Don separated due to what is depicted in the book as George's fickle personality, and once again, monetary issues. The fires at both this facility and the Rialto Theatre are documented, including a statement in the book which raises the possibility that George was an arsonist at the Leslie facility. See if you can spot it!

Additional chapters deal with the many other concerts George gave in his remaining years, such as a legendary performance at the Los Angeles Shrine Auditorium, as well as during a stint as a touring artist for Conn organs. He also had a relationship with both the Gulbransen and the Allen firms. Many fine photographs of George at the Conn are included, but not at the latter instruments.

Photos of a number of George's homes in the Los Angeles area are included. Some of them, unfortunately, did not fare well in the monochrome reproduction process. They may have been suboptimal color prints, which can be very difficult to duplicate in this fashion. Such issues of proper picture contrast affect other illustrations in the book, detracting from the otherwise credible effort to produce a quality publication. Also, some of the photos, particularly brochures from Rockefeller Center and newspaper clippings should have been reproduced in a larger size, to facilitate reading the interesting printed material they contain. I had a magnifying glass on my reading desk to assist in this effort. Perhaps in the next printing, those reproduction issues could be corrected. In that light, some of the text portions of each chapter, including citations and even the index are double spaced. Making them single-spaced might save some room to allow the illustrations to be enlarged, without having to add expensive additional pages. However, this elderly reader appreciated the large print used for the text itself!

The final portion of the book addresses the creation of George's last masterpiece, the Hollywood Philharmonic organ, as well as documenting his declining health, culminating with his demise and scattering of his ashes, but at his request, no marked grave. Such a last gesture may reveal something significant about the man's character—a mixture infused with notoriety and public adulation, but also an increasingly overwhelming need for privacy including, as Dr. Coale indicated, a rejection of many of his former friends.

There were many revelations in this book for me. One that is particularly noteworthy was his apparent distaste for Virgil Fox, but an admiration for E. Power Biggs. These sentiments are noted in a reproduced letter George wrote to Biggs' widow, in which he apologized for not having written it before Mr. Biggs' death. They say "time is a great healer." At least in this listener's opinion, given the many wonderful recordings Virgil Fox has left us, it would seem a bit harsh for George to have characterized Fox's playing as "grotesque!"

I was also unaware of the mutual admiration George shared with Frank Sinatra. While at the Paramount, both enjoyed making music together. It would have been wonderful if those collaborations had been recorded.

I also did not know to what extent George had a strong interest in and participated in so-called "classical music," with several concerts to his credit that contained this material, rather than theatrical renditions. Given his consummate musicianship, I am sure those performances would have been most enjoyable. He even conducted the Fauré *Requiem* at a church in Whittier, California to which he belonged for a time. George's close relationship to Richard Purvis, a fine liturgical organist and composer, was also something I did not know before reading this book.

The concluding portions of this book include many appendices, among which is an extremely informative and comprehensive listing of George's recordings, beginning with an explanation of the various record labels and disc formats, authored by Mark Renwick. Its thoroughness will be a boon to those record collectors out there, including myself, although Mark emphasizes that the best source for George's recordings is Banda Records, now controlled by Dr. Coale. There is a very brief citation of "playing tips" from George, but as an amateur organist, even if fully implemented, they are not likely to make me recognized as his disciple!

As a final bonus to this book, there is a website at which readers can have additional hours of pleasure examining supplemental material. Such a practice is a most up to date one in the publishing field, as many of my own professional journals have on-line resources, in addition to the printed materials coming each month.

In summary, I can say without qualification that this is a book which reveals the enormous effort made by Dr. Coale in assembling a definitive treatise regarding the somewhat mysterious life of a legend. Dr. Coale generously acknowledges what amounts to a "Who's Who" of distinguished musicians, organ technicians and other organ aficionados who provided considerable assistance in assembling the materials, as well as his sojourns to multiple libraries throughout the United States. But, it took the dogged determination and literary discipline of Dr. Coale, with the assistance of his acknowledged editors, Lew Williams and Richard Rogers, to make it all such a pleasure to read. And if this weren't enough, Dr. Coale indicates that there will be a forthcoming volume, which focuses on the many additional observations gathered through interviews of many who knew George, "warts and all." I am sure it will be a worthy successor to the present work, and look forward to its eventual publication.

I recognize that the book is expensive, but in fairness, creating printed matter is not the most economical means to disseminate information. Similarly, those of us who chose to buy David Junchen's extraordinary book, simply entitled "Wurlitzer," offered by our own Society, had to pay a considerable sum to own it. Like the Wurlitzer book, I feel this book is indispensable, and well worth its cost. Dr. Coale readily acknowledges the extensive travel needed to gather all of the information contained in this book (and, it appears, the forthcoming Volume II). Appropriately, he pays tribute to Wendell Jacobs, whose generous financial support made it possible to even consider such an extensive undertaking.

Nevertheless, to those who might still hesitate to purchase the book, I would paraphrase the famous American Express advertisement, "don't come home without it!"

To order a personally inscribed signed copy, visit www.GeniusOfGeorgeWright.com and click on "GW Store." Price is \$125.00.

Copies are limited, so don't delay. Currently, fewer than 100 remain in stock. Once gone, they're gone.

After January 1, 2018, unsigned copies will be available at Amazon.