



Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California

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Jim Spohn's Old Granada Theater

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It's not an empty building, although the dilapidated exterior and marquee that says "I Love Lucy" causes passers-by to think so. Step inside and Bakersfield's oldest, still-in-use theater is being magnificently restored, from the inside out -- by mastermind Jim Spohn.

Members of Bakersfield's old Blackboard newspaper got a tour of the Granada led by Spohn himself. The experience was part absorbing history lesson, part wondrous science lesson, and part a peek into the life of a very talented man who's obviously enjoying the toil of a life-long dream.

His wife, Lucy, (did you guess?) bought the theater as a present for hubby Jim several years ago. The gift allows this lucky fellow to indulge his passions for electronics, computer programming, art, old movies, and theater pipe organs. But pipe organs are at the top of Spohn's list. For most of his life he's collected organ equipment from all over the country, and now he has a grand setting to enjoy his stuff.

The Granada Theater is at 618 Kentucky Street in East Bakersfield, or as neighboring businesses like to call the neighborhood, Old Town Kern.

Spohn's theater is a treat to see in person, but if you can't, then you can follow his restoration at several online sites. One write-up says, "23-tons of Wurlitzer pipe organ is being installed and is partially playing. Projection and sound equipment have been reinstalled, as have a new screen and a Grand Drape. The owners intend to open the theater and do novelty shows with silent movies and pipe organ accompaniment. At this time the Granada puts on shows for private parties using its 35mm carbon arc projection equipment and the Wurlitzer pipe organ."



(Bakersfield Californian)

Spohn says that after the theater was built in 1927 it was so successful that it produced the money to build Tejon Theater, which is a few blocks north on Baker Street. So what was the old Granada like in its heyday? Historian George Lynch recalls, "We watched a lot of movies at the old Granada. I remember well the Saturday matinees in the late 1930s. The kids up front got so excited during one cowboy chase scene that they stomped their feet on the floor so hard they raised a dust storm!"

The good times ended, the theater went through rough periods and was nearly damaged beyond repair. "Off-and-on for about 20 years there were transients in here," says Spohn, "and they burned the projector, the screen, and the curtains. They broke every bit of glass, and stripped any metal they could sell. Then we bought it. We slowly started reversing the damage from the inside out."

Spohn has an obvious love for the old movie house, and he would like to get things back exactly the way they were. "We're in the process of making this building legal so we can get a business license. Maybe we'll be a dinner theater someday. Who knows? I'm not in any hurry. I know we'll never open as a traditional, operating theater, but we'll have novelty shows."

"A couple of years ago we got a letter from the City saying they intended to proceed with condemnation. Somebody'd driven by and thought it was an abandoned building. I explained to the city what we'd been doing and said, 'Give me 30 days, and we'll put on a show for you.' We did. We showed them some 1950s trailers, and then a local movie clips. They loved that because they saw things they remembered--Don Rodewald, K-A-F-Y Radio, and the old clock tower on Chester. After that we showed a silent movie, and I played the big organ. When that was over we had some vaudeville with Jimmy on the sax [*Jimmy Narducci is Spohn's brother-in-law*]. The City guys were satisfied."

Spohn starts our tour at the theater's Art Deco-inspired snack-bar nook: "Theaters originally didn't have popcorn and candy and drinks. This part was originally a dress shop next door to the theater. Then around 1946 they changed it over. These sliding doors separating the snack bar from the main lobby came from the old Maitia's restaurant, and they fit perfectly. The things you're going to see in this building I'd been dragging around with me forever. When you have 23-tons of pipe organ, it's no fun looking at it in someone else's warehouse."

The theater's tiny lobby has several small organs on display. Spohn tells us that he apprenticed for 20 years with a pipe-organ builder, and he adds, "I've worked on pipe organs all over the world." When we ask him to name one of the famous pipe organs, he mentions the organ at Scotty's Castle. "I rebuilt that one," he said. Someone asks, "How about Catalina Island?" Spohn: "I rebuilt that casino organ." He once did Disneyland's carousel organs, but he tells us, "I haven't been there in two years because they use tape recorders now." Locally, Spohn takes care of organs at 22 churches.

His prized possession is not an organ at all but an instrument called the Lobby Wurlitzer Player. "This device came from Cecil B. De Mille's

mansion," says Spohn. "The Wurlitzer Company made only seven of them, and I've rebuilt all of them. The machine was popular in the Twenties because there was not much in the way of radio, and there were no jukeboxes, so at dance parties people used these to play foxtrots. The Wurlitzer Player has 165 note-positions going across this paper roll. In the Teens and Twenties they didn't call it binary code, but it works on the same principle as a PC or laptop. There are tabs behind each hole, and they close-off tiny, pneumatic bellows. It's 100 percent air-operated by an electric vacuum motor."

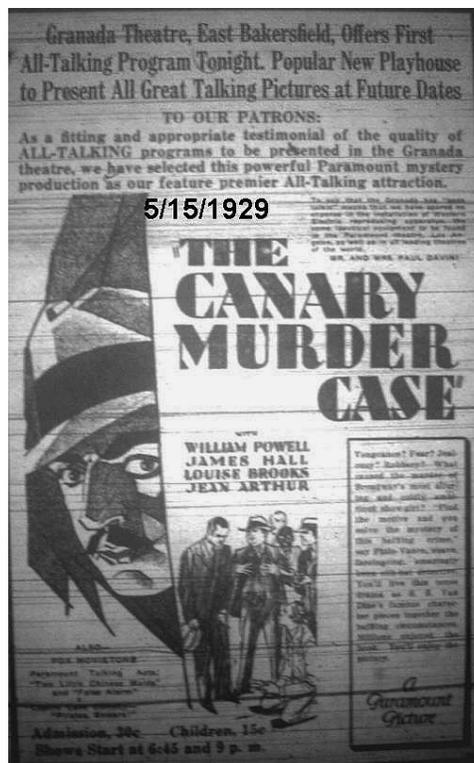


Bakersfield Californian, May 1, 1929

An interesting organ-console sits in the lobby. "Years ago I brought home some music to my mom, and she looked at it and said, 'My boyfriend used to play this song!' I scoured the country and found this organ console. Way back when, Mom sat right here next to her boyfriend while he played the organ for the movies. So these machines were made specifically for the movies. After the *Jazz Singer* came out in 1927, sound caught on in a hurry, and before long there was no use for theater pipe organs. Production fell off. Then the stock market crashed."



Originally the Granada didn't have an organ. "This was just a tiny, shoebox neighborhood theater. It probably had a piano. Only big theaters had organs." He escorts us into the theater proper.



Bakersfield Californian

The Granada is dark, deep, and narrow. It's musty and dank, a romantically dreary and nostalgic chamber where Chaney's Phantom might've felt at home.

Spohn's voice interrupts our wonder. "The theater was remodeled in 1951, before the earthquake. They painted over the old ceiling's artistic stenciling." Motioning to the stylized paintings on the walls, he says, "These aren't original. They're what I like to jokingly call Communist paintings that were put up in the Fifties." He grins mischievously. "I like to fiddle with very high-tech stuff. I now have a personal record of the frescos under that paint. Thank God I don't glow in the dark!" Wagner Paint Company volunteered to give Spohn the right paint for stenciling-restoration once the theater is ready for that.

Years before, acoustic spray had been applied to the walls. Spohn explains, "Without the acoustic spray and heavy curtains, a long, skinny room like this is an acoustic nightmare. It's good now." He led us down to the main organ in front of the stage. The piano-like console is there, but the organ's bellows and its tons-and-tons of pipes are out of sight, in two storage rooms on either side of the auditorium. Spohn retrofitted them himself. We ask him why he added so many voices to the organ. "Because I can!" he laughs. "Because it's fun!"

We peer into one of the narrow storage rooms. Spohn cautions us to watch our heads. The long chamber is filled, floor-to-ceiling, with individual lengths of organ pipe from the size of a pencil to the size of building columns. "A lot of the pipes came from the old California Theater in Glendale. The others are from all over the country. Everything you see here I restored and installed. When I tell people that some of the pipes are made out of lead, they go, 'Whoa!' Then I tell them you can't absorb the lead unless you chew on the pipes or put them in your nose. "

A pipe's shape and its composition influence its unique, organ sound: Wood pipes can imitate trombones. Tall, skinny pipes can mimic flutes. The storage room also has real trumpets, violins, tubas, and other instruments that we can't quite see. Spohn gestures to the room on the west side of the theater. "Too bad that side isn't working yet. All the fun stuff is over there, but it's not hooked up yet. It's got the sax, tympani, clarinet, and glockenspiel..."



Spohn takes us down to the big console. "This keyboard is from Bakersfield's old California Theater that was built in 1928." He treats us to an impromptu, silent film, mini-concert while explaining that musicians who played the silents "just faked it. They played little pieces, snippets--not whole songs."

How did Spohn learn to play the organ? He laughs, "I've spent 40 years tuning organs professionally. If someone hangs around organs that long and can't learn to play, then they're not paying attention."

"This big organ has a lot of small pieces from the CBS Studio's organ that was used for the Amos 'n' Andy show. The organist was Gaylord Carter, and I used to do his organ work before he had a show. Gaylord taught me to play the theme song. It goes like this." Wow!

Spohn's points to the top of the storage room on his right where shutters rhythmically flutter like the elephant ears in a Tarzan movie. "When I want more sound, I just push down the pedal here, and the

shutters open. The keyboard is electro-pneumatic-- just switches. The keys activate the appropriate pipes at selected pitches. Early organs didn't use electricity, so this air-operated, electrical switching system was added later."

In the theater's Exit hallway Spohn shows us the big organ's original switching system. An electrical cable connects the console keyboard to an intelligent switching system that masters the delivery of air. "On modern organs everything's done by computer. That bothers me because part of the charm of this instrument is the switching system. I have to admit that I've programmed it to be able to play MIDI files, but this basic system is still very much an air-operated pipe organ, not a computer-operated synthesizer."

Next is the stage. "Half the curtains here are from the stage of the Catalina Island Casino, and the fringe up there is from the Pasadena Playhouse. I sewed it on. Spohn motions to damage on the wall above the curtain: " In the Fifties they jack-hammered the corbels to install a 'Cycloramic' wide-screen for the Granada. I reproduced the new corbels for the restoration. There're lots of things like that that eat up a tremendous amount of time."

Spohn leads us up a narrow staircase to the mezzanine, where a street-sign-size window looks down on the theater below. "Men came up here to smoke," said Spohn. On this level, too, is the projection room, its walls of fire-proof concrete. Celluloid film and carbon-arc-light projectors are a dangerous combination, adds Spohn.

He has two of the old projectors in place, a 35-mm and a 16-mm. Why keep them? He answers, "It's about bringing the movies to life. Xeon lamps are standard nowadays, but they're inferior for color movies, so I use the old technology, carbon-arc light. It continually arcs, so to speak." He starts the machine. We feel heat from the projector, then he cracks open the inspection door. An intense white light floods the room. "Don't look at it directly! It's like an arc welder! I have to be cautious about fire. The color you get from this projector is superior. This technology is still used in India. It's hard for me to find carbons for my projectors, but the result is worth it. "Spohn spools up a trailer from Tom Hanks' weeper *The Green Mile*. Its color beats any movie theater in town--crystal clear, lush and vibrant.

Spohn: "The carbon-arc also makes a tremendous amount of carbon dioxide. If it isn't sucked out the projector's chimney, then the projectionist is dead! So here I am, working with blinding light and poisonous air! It sounds crazy, but this is the archaic technology I'm trying to preserve. People will be able to come to the Granada and see how it was done before the movies switched to the damn light bulbs!"

He leads us to his workroom, between the men's and women's mezzanines. It was once the theater's nursery. What great idea: A place to take kids when they can't handle sitting quietly. This space then flows into the women's lounge, which is now another storage room. "It originally held three vanity tables for primping," our guide explains.

Spohn is working on organ pipes from the Scottish Rites Temple in Pasadena and a Movie-Ola projector that he mentions was donated "by the Disney people." A voice in our group asks, "Why did you get the Movie-Ola?" Spohn answers, "Because, #1, I could get it; and, #2, I'm a film nut!" The Movie-Ola is a vital bit of equipment that allows Spohn to check tape-splices, do edits, and make repairs on his 35-mm film collection.

It doesn't surprise us at all to see a little practice organ in the workroom. Spohn says that the big one in the theater uses a lot of electricity and of course suffers from wear and tear. He energizes the little organ and rips off a few notes.

To his right is a step-by-step, telephone switching system, which is another of Spohn's many interests. He demonstrates it by dialing a rotary phone, which sets in motion a series of clicks and switches and results in a nearby phone ringing loudly. "This is how it used to be done before computers. I put it together to demonstrate how old phone systems worked."

We're now inspired to join in Spohn's amazing, retro-adventure. But he is guarded. "I've had hundreds of people who want to come help me. But I'm not ready for that. If I want to run around here at 2:00 pm in my underwear, then I want to be able to do that!" We wish we could help him, but we are comforted to know that as long as Jim Spohn thrives on sharing his old technology, and the theater's history, then we'll be back soon. We loved the afternoon.

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In 2012 Carla LaFong and Jenny Angel left Bakersfield to pursue professional music careers with Whiteboy *James and the Blues Express*, www.whiteboyjames.com.