

EXTRACT FROM
PEOPLE WHO MATTERED IN SOUTHEND AND BEYOND
BY DEE GORDON

ENA BAGA 1906 - 2004

ORGANIST

Ena Rosina was born in London of an Irish mother and Italian father. Her father conducted a cinema orchestra at the Angel, Islington, but the family moved to Southend when Ena was a child - apparently for the benefit of her health. She had three musical sisters - Florence, Celeste, and Beatrice - who formed an ensemble called Bagatrix. It was Florence, ten years her senior, who was apparently the first woman to play a cinema organ - at the age of 16.

By the 1920s cinema organists were less in demand, but they evolved as a cheap alternative for a full orchestra. By 1925, Ena was playing at the Strand Cinema in Southend and the Kingsway in Hadleigh (no longer in existence) and also played at the Palace Theatre, Westcliff on Sea and the Palace Hotel in Southend. She moved on to the New Gallery in Regent Street, London, and the Tivoli in the Strand, London. Talking pictures meant that Ena entertained cinemagoers between films rather than during them as her father had done. Her style gradually became flamboyant - in dress and demeanour. It seems that organists really were the pop stars of the inter war years. She also did music hall work, and even played at Balmoral for George V and Queen Mary in 1932.

While working at the Gaumont in Camden Town, London, in 1940, a bomb destroyed the organ, and she moved to the safer environs of the Tower Ballroom, Blackpool, replacing the famous Reginald Dixon on his radio broadcasts when he left for the R.A.F. Ena apparently played here every night until the end of the war, returning to London in 1945, to cinemas making room for Cinemascope at the expense of organs such as the Wurlitzer. Her signature tune was *Let's All Go Down the Strand*, later replaced by *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*.

Her fame was such that she was featured in a 1956 episode of *The Goon Show - The Mighty Wurlitzer*. Between 1957 and 1962 Ena visited South Africa to entertain the Italian workers building the Kariba dam. She was also responsible for composing many short pieces

of light music (including *Bagatelle*) and recorded a few albums.

Luckily for her, by the 1960s the Hammond organ was widely available and she was able to play the new smaller instrument at Joe Lyons's in Tottenham Court Road and at the pub she owned with her husband. She was not averse to including such material as *Can't Buy Me Love* and *Hey, Jude* in her repertoire. From 1969, she reached new audiences through Radio 2 with *The Organist Entertains*. Ena even appeared as a guest in a couple of episodes of television's *Upstairs Downstairs* and as herself in the 1992 film of *Chaplin*. Sister Florence became musical director at the National Film Theatre and died at the age of 94.

Ena continued performing until the age of 93, and survived two husbands, Reginald and James.

c. ***DEE GORDON 2005***

Sources:

Southend Standard 20.8.04

www.telegraph.co.uk

www.capslockoff.blogspot.com

www.madcornishproject.co.uk