

A memorial for:

Rich Olsen . . . aka Richie Poor

(“All Smoke & Mirrors”)

Multiple Contributors

The mechanical organ community suffered a great loss in the death of arranger, Rich Olsen. He was born on February 25, 1953 and succumbed to cancer on October 22, 2013. Rich moved from San Diego, Calif., to Turlock to be closer to John and Gloria Malone and their Play-Rite music roll operation last year, after suffering several health problems. His mother and sister also resided in Turlock.

Rich's life was complicated to say the least. He emailed Pete and Jill Hallock many times and the following are just some of the comments he made about his personal history.

I played in bands from 1968 (when I was 16) to 2000, my last live performance. My first band in '68 included the same keyboard player and singer (both blind) as the ones in the recording. The bass player came along about 1972. I left in '71, came back in early '74 (after a few years running the carousel at the local amusement park), left again in late '77 to join a traveling rock/disco band, started my own band in '82 which competed directly with these guys, was coaxed back in Dec of 84 (disabling the competition), and finally left for good in early '97 (when things were finally winding down for all of us), joined an all originals band, until that fell apart in 2000 (little actual work, lots of fun doing our own stuff exclusively).

That was enough for me, too many egos, too much drama. I just burned out on it all. But from '74 until '97 I worked continuously as a performing and recording musician, with no other job, and no breaks in the action.

Also in '97, to keep some money coming in, I took a job as a security guard (very 'anonymous' work), which gave me lots of time to think about things, and also to keep working on the organ music. I did that until mid-2011, when the job started getting more dangerous. From that point I did the organ work only, until I got sick at the beginning of last year.

A bit more trivia- I started arranging band organ music on a computer in 1993, to amuse myself while sitting around in the hotel rooms we stayed in while traveling. We played a lot of casinos in Vegas, and around Nevada, so this kept my wallet intact. I really had no idea at the time that I would be where I am now. I busted butt all those years to try and make a name for myself, who knew I'd be doing it this way?

I do miss many aspects of all of it, which is why I still to this day have a little recording studio set up in my place, my guitars and basses, my organ console, and a nice electric drum kit, all within easy reach (add the model railroad, a couch, a big surround system, and 2 cats, and it's a very cramped room). Before all this band organ stuff got going, I actually had time to record things I wrote."

To be honest, I got to where I am now completely through the back door. I did not know anyone (still don't know most), nor was I a member of any organization, or go to any rallies. On top of that, I'm lousy at 'networking.' I had put some music on the web, and contacted only Matt Caulfield to check it out. That was the magic key. I've only met in person Mike Ames (and his 'gang'), Robbie Rhodes, and John Malone. I live a hermit's life, well secluded.

Pete and Jill have provided a few photographs as has Fred Dahlinger. These are worked in with the independent comments of members whose life Rich's arranging has touched. They are seen below.

From Max Huff

When I purchased my Wurlitzer 105 in 2007, someone suggested I talk to Rich about how to format MIDI files for my organ. We quickly developed a friendship as he undertook to teach me how to manipulate MIDI files from one instrument scale to any other. That took awhile for me to learn, but Rich was always ready to write detailed instructions and send me software to do whatever I wanted.

He was a natural musician, and could listen to a tune and quickly write an arrangement for any known organ scale. Having been a drummer in various rock bands, his use of percussion in his arrangements was immediately recognizable as being his.

Although we never met in person, we conversed on many subjects and in depth. He was at that time going through a tough period, but he maintained his humor and was always excited to hear from his friends. He especially loved arranging for band organs. We are missing him already.

Not many of us are able to leave something behind that will continue to convey great pleasure to a wide and new audience for many years to come. He contributed much to the “Happiest Music on Earth.”

From Bill Nunn

I never met Rich face to face but I got to know him through his music and our long phone conversations. When Dick Lokemoen restored my Marenghi dance organ he had Rich arrange some tunes for it so we could hear the organ while it was still in his shop. Rich made the organ really sing! Over the years Rich arranged over 150 tunes for this organ. Some song titles were my suggestion but he picked the majority of the songs he arranged. He was always very humble and said whatever I didn't like I shouldn't pay for. Of course I liked everything. He had a lot of fun taking a simple tune and embellishing it. *Chopsticks*, *Happy Birthday* and the Budweiser advertising jingle are great examples of



Rich Olsen, aka Richie Poor, with the A Touch of Country Band. Rich is in the left, back.

this. When I play *Chopsticks* for a group of people many start using their hands as they were playing an imaginary piano and as the tune progresses they get an amazed look on their faces as they are transported somewhere else by Rich's genius. Rich also arranged many children's songs. I have learned with a group of kids to play one of these and get them dancing. Twenty dancing kids never say "it's too loud" because Rich's enthusiasm comes through in his music.

Rich arranged many tunes not considered main stream. Sousa's Official *Boy Scout March* is an example. I was a scout and never knew we had such a great march. Whenever I got an email from Rich with new songs I could hardly wait to punch them and listen to his talent. When Dick restored my Hooghuys dance organ, Rich did his magic again. *Puff the Magic Dragon* has become a favorite and *Entry of the Gladiators* sounds like the Hooghuys has become a fair organ. Each of Rich's songs has its own sound and personality. Rich was also very good at transposing other arrangers songs with similar scales to play on both my organs. Schollaert, Peersman, van Wichelen, Fasano, Hooghuys and arrangers at Mortier and Marenghi have their music live-on because of Rich.

We have lost a truly nice person with a great talent. Thank you, Rich.

From Bromfield Hine

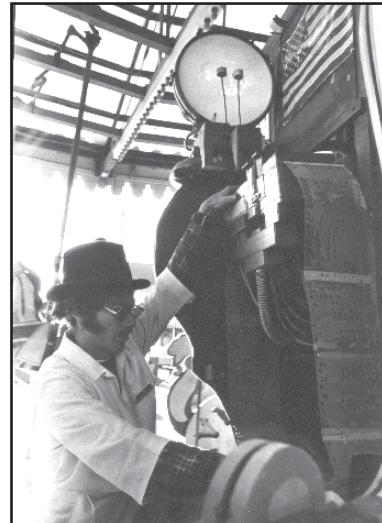
Here is one of what must be many examples of Rich Olsen's generosity and big heart. Even before delivery of my new Stinson-Decap band organ, I wanted to obtain MIDI files of tunes to play from my favorite Wurlitzer 165 roll (originally #6504, now 6532A*). Matthew Caulfield suggested that I contact Rich and I did so. In a 2009 e-mail, I requested his help. When Rich helped, he really did help. He was instrumental in having Frank Himpler convert the tracked (scanner) files to MIDI format files; then Rich converted those files to Stinson's format and sent them to Tony Decap for his conversion and then back to me for playing on my organ's MIDI player. The price for all of this—nothing. What an example of character! I tried to make it up to Rich in other ways, but price was never the most important factor in our relationship.

Over the next several years, I purchased nearly 70 tunes from Rich, including some custom arrangements that are now in the Wurlitzer 165 catalog. Although most recently, Rich was working on an extended project, converting tunes to another organ scale, he expressed his hope in being able to return to arranging Wurlitzer 165 tunes. Over time, my wish list had grown considerably. Even as we both realized that those arrangements would probably not be completed, I never felt that I should leave those hopes unexpressed.

There is one tune, among those that were in my wish list, whose lyrics seem even more poignant when I think how they could apply to Rich:

Beyond the blue horizon
Waits a beautiful day
Goodbye to things that bore me
Joy is waiting for me
I see a new horizon
My life has only begun
Beyond the blue horizon
Lies a rising sun

© Leo Robin 1930



Rich working on a Jimmie Verbeek fair organ (on a carousel) in 1973.

Photo: Fred Dahlinger

From Bjorn Isebaert

I got into contact with Rich Olsen via Bill Nunn, for whom Rich made arrangements for some of his organs, including the Hooghuys. Now, I have to say that until a few years ago, I always thought that there were no good arrangers for mechanical organs in the USA (apart from the rolls I knew arranged by Art Reblitz, that is) – a judgment that was mainly based on the Wurlitzer band organ recordings I had heard then. Then came Wayne Holton, a clearly gifted arranger, but that was it—at least, I thought. One day, Bill sent me some recordings of Rich's arrangements and I was very enthusiastic: Rich had his own style for sure, but seemed to have a really good feeling about how a tune could or should be played on an organ.

One day, Bill asked me to suggest some tunes for Rich to arrange on Bill's Hooghuys. I got into contact with Rich and sent him the recording of two tunes that I had on CD's played by local salon orchestras and musical bands. Much to my surprise, within two days Rich had the arrangements ready, and they sounded fantastic! The fact that he captured the spirit of both tunes so well all the more proved to me that he was a fantastic musician too. In our conversations, I learned to know him as a modest man but with a very good idea about what he wanted to create.

I'm sure that new arrangers will show their talents in due time, but hearing about Rich's death was very painful, as for me he truly was one of the revelations in the field of mechanical music, and it made clear to me that in the USA there were also talented people who were able to create fantastic arrangements for 'our' continental instruments. May he rest in Peace.

From Fred & Roselyn Fey

We were very saddened at the death of Rich. He was a true friend even though we had never met him in person. Just through numerous phone calls and emails we came to know him in a special way. We sensed his spirit and gift of sharing through his musical talent. Our family has a music ministry consisting of sharing our Automatic Musical Instruments with various nursing home facilities, child and adult day care centers, schools and churches. Additionally, we participate in local parades and seasonal events. One instrument is a "Circus" Calliope from Miner Manufacturing Company and the other is a Gebruder Bruder barrel organ converted to a Duplex 165 Paper Roll Pneumatic System in 1924. For all of these events, the majority of the band organ rolls that we use are from our collection of twenty-two 165 rolls superbly arranged by Rich. All who hear Rich's rolls enjoy them to the fullest—from the very young to the, well, our age and beyond!

A little over a year ago we provided our band organ for dance music for a local charity. Rich was so kind as to allow us to receive an advanced copy of one roll for the dance. His music provided the perfect atmosphere for the dance.

Rich Olsen has very humbly earned recognition of being a gifted arranger for all “seasons” and for all lovers of Automatic Musical Instruments. Thank you Rich. We will truly miss you and will be thinking of you each time we share your arrangements of “The Happiest Music on Earth!”

From Kevin Keymer

I knew from Bill Nunn that Rich had been sick recently, but I hadn’t heard of his passing. It was fun working with such a talented arranger, and we both learned together what it took to arrange and cut a good keyed book.

On the surface it seems easy to go from keyless to keyed music, but we found many large potholes on our way to success. I guess I was the one that punched out the first, and then last (Bill & Stacy Nunn’s wedding) keyed book he arranged on the original computer punch I built.

It was a fun run, and his musical talent will be heard by many for years to come. Take care, Rich.

From Andrew Park

I’ve first encountered Rich when Matthew Caulfield introduced him. It was in May or June 2008. At that time, he arranged several band organ rolls for the Valley Forge Music Roll company. I’ve talked and talked about how to arrange band organ music in MIDI. He said you need a keyboard and a computer.

In October 2008, I got a MIDI interface, USB-powered. So what am I to do? Fortunately, I’ve arranged a tune for the 125 scale. It was *I’m In the Market for you*. I’ve sent it to him, and he gave me a .WMA file of the tune, with real band organ sounds! So cool that I’ve arranged few tunes: *How about me* (ca. 2009,) and *Miss You* (December, 2010).



Rich working on the carousel in 1973.

What inspired me to arrange a tune for the 165 is that I’ve listened to recordings of several band organs, playing J.W. Tussing’s arrangements. His arrangements, especially fox trots, are characterized by dotted eighth notes, with a syncopation of the accompaniments. His Waltz arrangements is straight-forward and flowing. I’ve arranged one tune, *I’ll Be Home for Christmas*, for the 165 scale in December 2010 and for the 166 scale in February of 2012.

In the year 2009, Valley Forge was closed, so Rich made arrangements for Play-Rite, as well as the previous arrangements cut at the Valley Forge, to be cut there. He arranged *Happy Birthday*, several rock ‘n roll tunes, etc. for every band organ! Several YouTube videos of his arrangements are all over the place, including carousel ride clips, band organ rallies, and much, much more.

When Rich’s health declined at around 2012, he had an operation. He sent me MIDI scans of the 165 rolls, plus B.A.B. transcriptions. He moved to Turlock, California. This is where Play-Rite was. At that time, I’ve discussed about the register changes on the 165 band organ, and he commented about the two swell opens on the song *Manhattan Beach*. I’ve also commented on the flashy registrations!

My Last arrangement and his last email was around June 2013, Rich commented, I’ve arranged *Sierra Sue*. It’s not a Wurlitzer arrangement at all. It’s a B.A.B., J.L. Cook arrangement of the tune. He commented further:

“I’ve imitated his style of arrangement.” I heard the arrangement, and it sounds like a real band organ, plus flaws during register changes from triangle to bass drum. I’ve replicated that flaw, just by listening to recordings of the Steeple Chase carousel organ (now Flushing Meadows.)

And then comes October of 2013. His health deteriorated. I’ve emailed him the last time, about the same subject on register changes. And he said the following last email to me: “Yes, built and playing. I don’t have any recordings yet, but soon...”

This is his last email that I won’t forget. In fact, it’s too late to let him record the newly-built Play-Rite 166 organ, made by the same company that replaces the 165 organ at Seabreeze. His death was announced Tuesday, October 23, 2013.

When I read about his death, I was so shocked. I’ve sang that “doom” music, for humor, just like an attacker hit him. “Bum, Bum, Bum.” Ironically, Rich is a humor! He will be missed for all band organ lovers out there. Farewell, Rich!

From Fred Dahlinger

Being pre-occupied with European fairground organs, I never really knew anything about Rich Olsen until long after he’d established himself as a splendid arranger for Mortier dance organs, Wurlitzer 165 and Mills Violano-Virtuoso rolls, among other instruments. He was comfortable working behind the scenes, contracting to others that were something of his public presence. His life on stage was, by choice, behind him. In time, it was clear when someone said that it was a “Rich Olsen” arrangement, it conveyed the meaning of superb and creative work of the best kind. It took a longer time to get to know Rich as a person.

One day I just started to receive “proofs” for tunes being supplied to Bill Nunn, for his various projects and that started an exchange that continued until recently. It was a pleasure to be in on the process. You never knew how inventive Rich was going to be with each piece until you listened to it. The music was made through my PC with a “digital” organ that Rich created with sounds from selected pipes. It was adequate to hear the arrangement, to assure that it was free from errors. There was no doubt that when it sounded good on the generic digital organ that it would be superb on a Hooghuys, Marenghi or whatever instrument for which it was destined.



Rich composing at the organ in 1973.

Perhaps more than anything else Rich loved to explore and exploit the full musical possibilities of mechanical organs, and music in general. When I quipped that a local friend had challenged a local dance band to play *Ave Maria* in polka time, his next e-mail brought with it his truncated arrangement of the beloved melody—in polka time. He demonstrated organ capability in a diversity of ways that few arrangers have achieved. In the instrument heyday, he'd have been much desired by the manufacturers for his talent.

Rich made a very substantial contribution to American roll-operated, pneumatic organ history when he informed several of us that he had possession of a box of roll documentation that had passed from John O. Davis to John Malone. The prize in the holdings was a Nortona roll catalogue, a publication from a division of the Rand Co. that no one had ever heard of before. Then there were notations on envelopes in Davis's hand that listed Artizan rolls that had been sold by Wurlitzer, after the defunct firm's stock in trade passed to the giant. It shed tremendous light on the transition of Artizan's rolls in their last years. Rich could have kept these documents for himself, but he willingly shared all of it, for everyone's benefit.

Rich and I discussed the rare Ruth 46 organ that I acquired. Humbly, he said that he wasn't sure if he'd be able to do any arranging work for me because he was a bit intimidated by the scale, and by Ruth organs, with their very authoritative tonal structure. There was also concern about his application of time to "one off" arrangements, when so many organ people were clamoring for his time and talent in their shared interests. "I doubt that anyone will ever call me and ask 'Would you have any interest in Model 46 Ruth arrangements?' :-). I will, when the time comes. I've figured out how I can do it without having to deal with the scrambled scale, then convert to that when I'm done."

There was no doubt in my mind that he'd excel at the work, as he did with all other pieces, because his labors to make the six bass, multiple register 165 scale sound so good was a task very much like what he'd face with the Ruth. Unfortunately, he passed before the final scale of the Ruth took form. It will always be a wonder for me to think about what Rich might have been able to accomplish with the Ruth challenge.

It was clear that things were not going well for Rich. I asked him how it was going and he responded:

They really did try to do me in, but I'm still here. Some complications during and after a 'common,' *expletive* surgery, hopefully I won't have to do it again. Still hard to sit for any long periods, that's going to take some time.

His last reflection provided good advice for everyone:

I'm doing ok; I've always taken life one day at a time. If I get up, it's a great day. If I make it to bedtime, it WAS a great day. If I get up the next day, etc.

It was a great day when I came to know Rich Olsen.

From TJ Fisher

I am so grateful for Rich's body of work. In my travels around the northeast I have heard Rich's rolls very often. At Glen Echo Park, where I work, several of Rich's arrangements are among our most popular, and have really helped to get more visitors interested and asking questions about the band organ.

Rich's country/western, big band, tango, and other themed rolls have led to countless discussions about the breadth of music in our library, and visitors returning to hear more. On many rolls, Rich concluded with a rousing classical arrangement. His *Malagueña*, *Flight of the Bumblebee*, and many others are among the most sophisticated and sensitively-arranged pieces in our library, never failing to attract attention.

I can't remember how I first got in touch with Rich, but once I did, he often sent me tidbits about the arranging process, pieces he was working on for other scales, or questions about how I felt about a certain piece at a certain tempo or in a certain style. I will miss seeing Rich's name show up in my inbox.

Rich will be very badly missed by me, by our community, and by the no doubt thousands of people who have heard his work and may never know his name.

From Jill & Pete Hallock

We were one of the lucky ones to have been on Rich's list of people who he would contact and ask what tunes we would like to hear on a music roll. Then he would send out to us a sample of the tunes. Rich then went on to send us a roll that has some of the tunes that Pete had suggested, Rich seemed to enjoy Pete's lists of tunes, one of Pete's favorites was the *Flight of the Bumble Bee* that we wanted to be able to play on our Bruder Organ. Rich will be missed.



Rich as a drummer in 1989.



Sketch, one of two musical cats that Rich cared for.

From Dan Robinson

Rich had been a drummer for various bands, and his band organ arrangements certainly disproved the stereotype that drummers aren't real musicians. Wurlitzer 165 music impresario Matthew Caulfield first learned of Rich when he discovered Rich's website in late 2004. It featured some of Rich's MIDI arrangements of lost Wurlitzer 165 tunes, played through sound samples so they sounded like they were playing on a real band organ. Rich would come to be called a reincarnated Wurlitzer arranger, and he absolutely was that.

Matthew envisioned actual paper rolls of Rich's work, and after a collaboration between the two, "Richie Poor's Debut Roll" was released in 2007 (Richie Poor being Rich's pseudonym; subsequent rolls would carry his actual name). Now, just six years later, there are 22 Wurlitzer 165 rolls arranged by Rich, all produced in quantity and being enjoyed on band organs public and private all over the country. He also arranged several rolls for Style 150 and Style 125 organs, along with custom, MIDI-only work for individuals and arrangements for some other types of mechanical musical instruments as well.

Rich was adept at arranging anything from a 19th-century waltz to a 1960s tune. He was equally gifted whether arranging in the Wurlitzer style or in his own style. The new rolls he arranged were the latter and really got the most out of the organs for which they were created. His arrangements of tunes from lost Style 165 rolls have not been put to paper (though they can be played on MIDI-equipped 165 organs), but those that were reconstructions of lost tunes from existing rolls have been cut and added to those rolls, and they blend in so seamlessly that no one would know the rolls were not entirely the work of period Wurlitzer arrangers.

Rich was described by those who knew him as a good friend who was always humble and self-deprecating. He continued to arrange prolifically even as he battled serious health problems over the last couple of years. Still, his passing was unexpected, and it is quite sad to realize that there will be no more new music from him. The band organ world has lost a tremendous talent, a true "virtuoso," as Matthew Caulfield aptly called him, but the hugely impressive body of work Rich leaves behind ensures that he will never be forgotten.

From Dick Lokemoen

My first communication with Rich Olsen was on August 28, 2008. He had been contacted by Larry Villano to convert some 66-key B. A. B. rolls to MIDI files so that they would be playable on the ex-Savin Rock 65-key Gavioli organ owned by Ken Harck. I had restored it and the instrument was still located in my shop. Rich needed the scale it was playing and had other questions.

The Gavioli was able to play either book music or MIDI files. In short order he sent a sample B. A. B. file for me to test. Rich's transfer was right on, with no issues. He then sent a 165 conversion from an unreleased 165 roll for me to test. He said "Don't jump, it starts with a BANG!" It was Sabre Dance and, yes, I did jump, FOR JOY!

That got me thinking that maybe I could ask him to do a march for the Gavioli. I suggested *The Gladiator* by Sousa and he agreed. I said there was no rush on this commission. Well, the next morning, it was here. His message said "Hello Dick. Here is a quick go at it. I can't claim to get everything done this fast, but it was a good excuse to get away from 150 (Wurlitzer rolls) for a bit. I hope it sounds ok. Rich." It sounded better than okay, it made my spine tingle.

I thought, OK, we have great arrangers doing rolls and books already, but they must all be overly busy as it is like "pulling teeth" to get some music from them. Maybe Rich can help?

The restoration of Bill Nunn's 81-key Marenghi was approaching completion at this time and Bill needed new music. I e-mailed Bill about Rich's arranging ability. Bill replied: "That is good news about Rich Olsen. He can start arranging as soon as the scale is finalized. Pick out some tunes for him to do, at least 50 to start with. I think we can use the MIDI format for the punch machine but I will check with Kevin (Keymer). If the first tunes are good then order another 50."

I forwarded Bill's message to Rich and he replied: "50 tunes to start, eh? That's five ten tune rolls worth!" The Marenghi did not have a scale book or any documentation of the register keys. Wayne Holton helped with suggestions and the scale was finalized and sent to Rich. He started sending punch files for Kevin Keymer and Bill Nunn to process on the automatic punch Kevin had built.

Rich sent a lot of tunes over the next four years and none of the files ever needed correcting; they were always perfect. His last arrangement was the *Special Wedding Medley*, in honor of Bill's marriage to Stacey in August, 2013.

Rich would talk about his "night job" and how it was getting difficult for him due to a bladder problem. I suggested he get it checked out, but he thought it would go away in time. It got worse and he ended up in the hospital. Rich confided that John Malone had offered to him a place near his home in Turlock, California, but Rich resisted. I suggested that it was a kind gesture he should follow up on, but he wanted independence. Rich finally relented and moved to Turlock in early 2013. I was happy to know Rich was being cared for and I am grateful to the Malones for doing so much for Rich.

Rich had just started arranging for Bill's 77-key Hooghuys, which was completed in November, 2012. The first attempts were truly fine and he was looking forward to advancing his skills with this rather difficult scale. Then illness struck once again.

In our e-mails and phone conversations we discussed many subjects. Rich had a kind and gentle voice but both he and I told it the way it was, with no B.S.! He was fun and interesting to talk to and I truly miss those conversations.

During one conversation I asked Rich how he actually did his arranging. He replied: "It's all smoke and mirrors, Dick, all smoke and mirrors."

RICH E. POOR joined Touch Of Country one year ago after working in several West Coast touring bands and most recently was the leader of San Diego's 1984 CCMA Band of the Year. Rich is not unfamiliar with Touch Of Country, though...having worked with most of the group in different bands since 1968. An avid hat collector, it is not uncommon for Rich to wear several different hats during any particular set of music. Rich plays percussion instruments and adds a "rich" vocal...nothing "poor" about his talents.

"A bio made from a short flyer about the band—probably ca. 1985." This was found in materials at Rich's apartment.

Courtesy of Robbie Rhodes

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Photos of "Richie Poor" wearing various hats.

Photos: Robbie Rhodes