

As silent movies light up Kansas City Music Hall, this organist crafts a soundtrack in the shadows

Before sound came to the movies, silent films ruled the silver screen and music from a theater pipe organ enhanced the drama. A Lee's Summit musician is reviving that tradition at the Kansas City Music Hall.

KCUR 89.3 by Julie Denesha

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Dr. Marvin Faulwell's Allen GW4 theater organ looms large in his Lee's Summit living room, where he's created a score for the silent film "Peter Pan." Faulwell will perform it Sunday at the Kansas City Music Hall downtown.

Dr. Marvin Faulwell sits at the console of a tall, wooden Allen GW4 theater organ in the living room of his Lee's Summit home. The silent film "Peter Pan" plays on a small, flat screen, as Faulwell makes music to match the on-screen movements of a fairy.

"I wanted it to be a happy sort of thing," he says.

With one eye on the screen above him and the other on his sheet music, the retired dentist's fingers dance across four, tiered keyboards.

"It's just a charming movie," he says.

The 1924 silent film is the first adaptation of Scottish author J. M. Barrie's 1904 play.

"I think it really goes back to Betty Bronson, who plays the role of Peter Pan. She just lights up the screen," Faulwell says. As for Ernest Torrence, who plays Captain Hook, "he is so mean you have to laugh at him."



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A lobby card advertisement for the 1924 film "Peter Pan," starring Mary Brian, Betty Bronson and Esther Ralston.

This weekend, the Kansas City Theatre Pipe Organ club is presenting the film at the Kansas City Music Hall, as part of a series of free events held several times a year. Faulwell will provide the music.

The organ club's president, Marc Dorsett, says film buffs thought for decades that any copies of "Peter Pan" were lost over the years — film reels were not generally preserved once a run ended.

At the time of its release, the silent film was celebrated for its innovative special effects. Notably, the fairy Tinker Bell was portrayed by both a light bulb and a live actor.

"Theaters would run the films as long as there was audience interest and, as soon as the audience started to wane, the films usually were destroyed," Dorsett says.

A study by the Library of Congress estimates more than 80% of films made in the silent era have been lost. In some cases, film would spontaneously combust because movies from the first half of the 20th century were filmed on unstable, highly-flammable cellulose nitrate film. Careful storage was a must.

Luckily, in the 1950s a film restorer at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, discovered a copy of "Peter Pan" in a vault at the Eastman School of Music, and the film was restored. It's been popular on the silent film festival circuit ever since.

'That kind of hooked me'

Faulwell's been playing theater organs for silent films since 1985, and still remembers his first foray into the craft, playing for the 1925 Charlie Chaplin film "The Gold Rush" at the Granada Theater in Kansas City, Kansas.

"I'm sitting down there in the pit playing and there's a little old lady behind me, and at the sad scene she's just crying and just really enjoying herself," he says. "And that kind of hooked me."

Faulwell creates a unique score for each film using authentic music from the era. Over the years, he's accompanied more than 200 movies, featuring silent film stars like Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin.

At Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville, Faulwell discovered a vast collection of silent film music, so he went there to do a little digging. Archivists even set up a piano for him to play the old music.

"They'd bring up music from the stacks and I'd go through it and some of it they would copy for me," Faulwell says. "I came home with a pretty good pile of music."



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Faulwell has collected a large selection of music written in the 1920s. Most of it is incidental music intended to score generic things like chase scenes, love scenes and battle scenes.

"I have a large selection of music that was made by composers back in the '20s and the early portion of the 1900s," Faulwell says. "Most of it's what's called incidental music. This is music that's (like), 'Chase Scene No. 1,' and 'Love Scene No. 5,'" and battle scenes and all that sort of stuff."

The earliest silent films were screened in the late 1890s, usually with music played on piano.

As movies became more popular, theaters got bigger and they needed a bigger sound. A few theaters featured full orchestras but it was cheaper to hire one musician to play a theater organ — and their booming sound easily filled the space.

By the early 1910s, almost every movie house in the country had a massive pipe organ.

Into the pit

The reign of silent films was brought to a close with the 1927 premiere of "The Jazz Singer," the first feature-length motion picture with recorded speech and music.

The movie features six songs performed by Al Jolson in blackface, a common practice for white actors at the time that's now widely condemned as racist.

Once the "talkies" came, theater organs were no longer needed.



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Theater organs like Faulwell's Allen GW4 have multiple keyboards, a pedalboard, and a myriad of switches and controls.

So, many of the old organs were lowered into their theater's orchestra pit. Others were sold. Some were cemented over. Often, organ pipes were left in a building's chambers and, when theater roofs leaked, they disintegrated.

"A few organs got saved," Faulwell says. "Volunteers, people with interest in it came and bought them for \$100. Most were lost."

Kansas City Music Hall's is one of a handful of grand, old theater organs that were rescued and restored. Faulwell says it's a thrill to perform on.

"The Music Hall is a great organ, and everything just goes up a notch when you're there," he says.

Dorsett, of the pipe organ club, says screenings like the one this weekend are a chance for audiences to experience silent films the way they were intended.

The KCPTQ recently purchased a 15-by-32-foot motion picture screen for the free Music Hall events they host throughout the year.

But watching a silent film with a live organist is more than a trip to the movies — it's also a concert. Dorsett says hearing the Robert Morton pipe organ in an art deco venue is a highlight.



Kansas City Theatre Pipe Organ, Inc.

The elaborate 1927 Robert Morton theatre pipe organ, with its white, painted cabinet and gold ormolu, glows onstage at the Kansas City Music Hall. The instrument is owned and maintained by the Kansas City Theatre Pipe Organ, Inc.

"So many people don't know about this fabulous instrument," he explains. "This is (a) prestigious instrument in terms of the theater organ world."

Still, when the lights go down and the credits begin to roll, the music must only enhance the mood onscreen, and never call attention to itself, Faulwell says.

"The theater organist really ought to be forgotten when the movie starts," he says. "You shouldn't be doing anything that's highly technical, you shouldn't be loud and overpowering the movie. You just help the movie along."

At the end, though, audiences *do* respond to the music — and they generally love it.

"I love the audience," Faulwell says. "Nobody hates applause, I promise you. When people are responding to what you're doing, that makes it all worthwhile."

Kansas City Theatre Pipe Organ, Inc. presents a free matinee of "Peter Pan" at 2 p.m. on Sunday, September 10 at the Kansas City Music Hall, 301 W. 13th St., Kansas City, Missouri, 64105.