

J. Knight Barnett was born in the Sydney suburb of Roseville in about 1904. He was educated at Sydney Church of England Grammar School and by the age of twelve he was playing the church organ. From then on he played in many churches, including the Church of England at Wagga Wagga. According to Knight, in an interview some years ago, he also conducted orchestras in suburban cinemas in the silent days. He turned to accountancy for some time and also became musical director for the Roseville Musical Society and the Manly Amateur Theatrical Society.

During 1924 he became secretary, accountant, orchestral conductor and announcer for radio station 2BL (which was operating from a studio in Phillip Street, Sydney). It was with 2BL that he became known on the air waves as 'Uncle Peter'. A 1931 programme from the Prince Edward theatre states:

"... Uncle Peter...who fulfilled the combined functions of Examiner in English, Arbiter of Artistic Taste, Broadcasting Critic and Oracle of Wisdom. His marvellous versatility enabled him to take various parts in broadcasting work and he has strummed for the Broadcasters' trio, acted as accompanist to singers and was associated with Miss Dorothy Dewar in several short acts."

It was also on 2BL that he conducted one of the first studio broadcasts of George Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue with the 2BL Light Orchestra of specially selected musicians.

With the arrival on the Sydney cinema scene of the Prince Edward and its Wurlitzer in 1924, Knight Barnett set about learning as much as he could about the theatre organ. He was fortunate in that two noted American organists assisted him - Fred Scholl and Joseph Wayne. In May 1929, Knight became assistant organist at Sydney's Capitol Theatre. While the Roseville Musical Society lost its Musical Director, the Capitol Theatre gained a promising young organist. (It is interesting to note that Idwal Jenkins took over from Knight with the Roseville Society.)

In the Capitol News of June, 1929, Fred Scholl wrote of Knight;

"Mr. Barnett has had an extremely varied career as a musician, which has given him that wonderful resourcefulness so necessary for the theatre organist. His keen sense of tone, colouring, rhythm and good taste, has won him a featured position on the programme of the intermediate sessions. His rise has been phenomenal."

Shortly after, Knight went to the State Theatre, Sydney as assistant organist to Price Dunlevy. He did not remain there for long. Within six months Knight became the featured organist at the Capitol when Fred Scholl left for New Zealand and its new Auckland Civic Theatre (which opened in December, 1929). Knight's popularity was increasing enormously.

Violinist, and member of the NSW State Conservatorium Orchestra, Dulcie Blair, was married to Knight in December, 1929. The wedding party comprised members of the Capitol Theatre's administration and orchestra. State Theatre organist, Price Dunlevy, was Knight's best man. Unfortunately, the festivities stopped short when many of the party had to return to their respective theatres for the evening shows. Knight worked at the State a little later.

Kogarah's Victory Theatre was Knight's next engagement, taking over from Eddie Horton who left to open the Parramatta Roxy theatre. Knight gave his opening performance at the Victory on 15th February, 1930. He stayed until May of the same year, then went to the Concord Ritz Theatre when that theatre opened its Christie installation. (He was to return to the Victory in late 1936 for a 'special engagement').

His time at the Victory saw him in the position as Organist and General Entertainer, and this is where his broadcasting experience stood him in good stead.

When Miss Julia Dawn left the Prince Edward, Knight took over the console there. The season of VIENNESE NIGHTS opened on Wednesday, 20th May, 1931. This was a distinction since he was the first Australian-born organist to play at the theatre. Knight appeared 'at all sessions', playing 'Humoreske' and 'You're driving me Crazy.

The 1931 Prince Edward programme reported that:

"He has that happy knack of gauging the public's tastes and believes in catering to every class of patron - as far as possible, of course. This gift, combined with his very considerable musical talent and versatility, go to make up the accomplished and popular organist that he is."

In June 1933 offers from J.C. Williamson's Auckland Regent Theatre and Sir Benjamin Fuller's Dunedin Empire Theatre proved too attractive for Knight who sailed for the 'land of the long white cloud'. Knight returned in December of that year to join Alf Bezant's Western Suburbs Cinemas circuit. He opened at the Palatial Theatre, Burwood on 13th February, 1934 and stayed with the circuit until 1941, with the exception of a brief guest appearance at the Kogarah Victory in 1936.

During his time with W.S.C. he appeared at the Parramatta Roxy, the Auburn Civic, the Hurstville Savoy and the Strathfield Cinema.

According to Ronald Roberts of the Australian Music Maker and Dance Band News 1 November 1938 (p .54):

"Knight Barnett and I amused ourselves with a few figures the other day. Mathematical figures, I mean. We worked out that in his six months season at Parramatta he will have travelled 13,200 miles to play just under 100 hours. He spends four hours per day in the train. Who wants to be an organist?"

From the same magazine by the same author, dated 1 March 1939 (p.55) reporting on the best show of the month:

"The best of the month goes to J.Knight Barnett, who sent his girlfriend, 'Annie Laurie', round the world just once more. Of all novelties, this one is probably the best, and Barnett's capable showmanship is a sheer delight. His showmanship is one that commands respect, because it is backed up by a sound musical knowledge and ability. It is not used as a shield to hide defects - a common enough device - but a medium for the exploitation of his talents."

While Knight was on the W.S.C. circuit, he was also broadcasting regularly from various theatres in the mid-1930's on radio 2CH. One such show, Masters of the Organ, which included other W.S.C. organists, Paul Cullen, James Williams, Denis Palmistra and Norman Robins, commenced on Monday, 31st October, 1938. Unfortunately, the broadcasts weren't recorded and broadcasting of the show ceased in mid-1939.

With the coming of war, Knight enlisted in the A.I.F. in 1941 returning to the W.S.C. circuit in 1946 after demobilisation, going to the Civic Theatre at Auburn. (by this time, W.S.C. had become part of Hoyts Theatres Ltd.) It was while he was here that he made his first commercial recordings, consisting of medleys by Australian composers.

He returned to the Savoy, Hurstville in March, 1947 and remained there until April, 1949 when the organ interludes were confined to Saturday nights. On 2nd August, 1949, Knight was appointed resident organist at the Hoyts Regent Theatre, Adelaide. he held this position until 1967 when the theatre was closed, extensively remodelled and the organ removed. Following this, Knight retired, but taught the organ and was patron of the Theatre Organ Society in South Australia.

His arrival in Adelaide also began a remarkable association with Alec Regan's Melodyland programme which made an uninterrupted 1332 weekly broadcasts over the ABC. As wellll, Knight broadcasted each week on the ABC's Theatre Organ Club and Sentimental Journey for a number of years.

'So deep is the Night', based on a melody by Chopin, was Knight's signature tune for many years until he moved to Adelaide, where he changed it to 'September in the Rain'. Knight had two records issued from tapes made while he was playing in Adelaide.

He passed away in February, 1984, in his eightieth year. His wife, Dulcie, followed him on 22nd June, 1989.

The saddest part of this story is that, while so many people heard Knight "in action," nothing remains of his work in the 1920/1940 period - the time when he was, most probably, at his peak, and playing on a wide variety of instruments.

REFERENCES:

- Australasian Cinema - 9.3.1984
- Australian Music Maker - various issues - 1938 to 1940
- Broadcasting Business - 10.11.1938
- CapitolNews - June 1929
- Knight of the Theatre Organ, by J.Gardiner
- Notes of Interview with Knight Barnett by F.Ellis
- Prince Edward Theatre Programmes - 20.5.1931 & 7.10.1931
- Roseville Musical Society Programme "The Geisha" 1928/29
- Theatre Organ Memories (Record Sleeve) C.Johns
- Wireless Weekly - various issues (1930's)

KNIGHT BARNETT. Theatre organ solos

Sydney, November 21, 1946

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|---------|--|-------------------------|
| CT 2359 | Selection of May Brahe songs - Part 1
(Listen Mary/Bless this house/Spring is on the way) | Regal Zonophone G 25079 |
| CT 2360 | Selection of May Brahe songs - Part 2
(Close thine eyes/Evening shadows/Keep thou my heart) | - |
| CT 2361 | Selection of Alfred Hill songs
(Pro Patria Australia/A Maori lullaby/Waiata poi) | Regal Zonophone G 25080 |
| CT 2362 | Selection of Emmett Adams songs
(Life's great sunset/God send you back to me/The Bells of St.Marys) | - |
| CT 2363 | Selection of Henry Krips songs
(Shall I be weary/One song is in my heart) | Regal Zonophone G 25081 |
| CT 2364 | Selection of Fred Whaite songs
(Where the mountains go down to the sea/I'm dreaming again of
Castles in Spain) | - |

Adelaide, late 1960's

- | | |
|---|-----------------|
| Hello Dolly | Camden CAMS 181 |
| I believe | - |
| All the things you are | - |
| Real live girl | - |
| Impossible dream | - |
| Climb every mountain | - |
| Consider yourself/As long as he needs me | - |
| June is busting out all over/If I loved you | - |
| Smoke gets in your eyes | - |
| The lady is a tramp | - |
| Exodus | - |
| Love is here to stay | - |
| Lover | - |



KNIGHT BARNETT AT THE CONSOLE

Information on the second Long Play record is requested from any reader who may have the record.

THE PHONO RECORD April 1927

The record which Albert Whelan, the popular Australian comedian contributes to the Vocalion list this month is of unusual interest, one of the items being a very amusing song of his own, entitled, "So will I," and entirely new departure from Mr. Whelan's usual style. (Vocalion X 9970 - Ed.)

Evidently he thinks it might be a worth while idea to show that a British artist can quite easily sing delicate comedy songs without shouting the words. Here, then, is Mr. Whelan out-whispering the whisperers! The result is delightfully amusing.

Mr. Albert Whelan appeared before their Majesties the King and Queen at the recent Royal command performance, and these first records by the Marconi Company's electrical process, are, as usual, intensely realistic.
