



Spohn's Old Granada Theater

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By CARLA LaFONG and GILBERT GIA
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It's not an empty building, though the dilapidated exterior and marquee reading "I Love Lucy" makes passers-by think so. But mastermind Jim Spohn is magnificently restoring Bakersfield's oldest still-in-use theater, from the inside out.

The old Blackboard newspaper got a tour of the Granada led by Jim Spohn himself. The experience was part absorbing history lesson, part wondrous science demonstration, and partly a look into the life of a genius who's obviously enjoying the toil of a life-long dream.

His wife, Lucy (did you guess?), bought the theater as a present for Jim several years ago, and it's allowed this lucky fellow to indulge his passion for electronics, computer programming, restoration, old movies, and theater pipe organs. But pipe organs are at the top of Spohn's list. He'd gathered organ equipment from all over the country, and now he has a grand setting to enjoy his unique collection.

Granada Theater is at 618 Kentucky Street in East Bakersfield, or as the East Bakersfield businesses association likes to call it, Old Town Kern. If you can't see Spohn's theater in person, you can still follow his restoration at a dozen online sites. One 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."



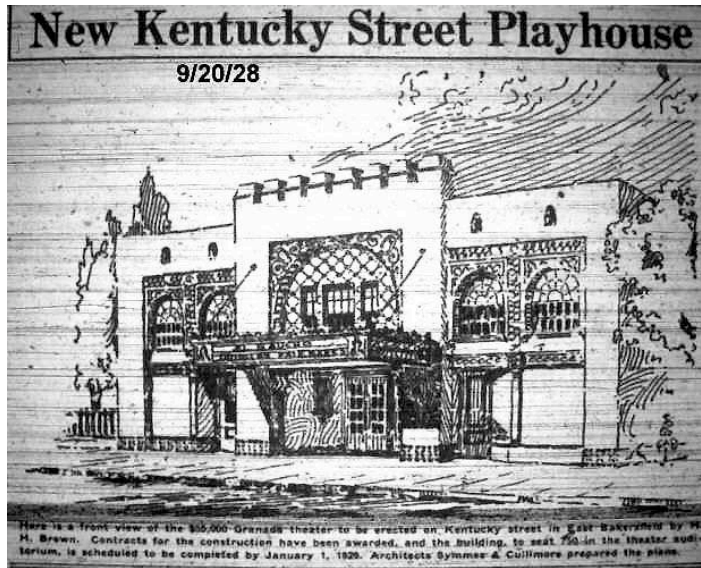
1908 : M.R. Para's Morley Theater, Chester and 20th in Masonic Temple.

Bakersfield has a long and successful theater tradition.¹ Spohn tells us that after the Granada was built in 1929, its immediate success is what built the Tejon Theater a few blocks up Baker Street.² 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!"³

¹ By 1909, Chester Ave was known as "Theater Row." Along the avenue were Morley's, Parra's, Scribner's, Grogg's, the Empire, and the Lyceum.

² The Granada was the third movie house in East Bakersfield. The Cuneo brothers owned the first two: "Work on the construction of a building on the property of James Arp at Kentucky and Baker Streets, East Bakersfield, is under way, the excavations having been completed. A moving picture playhouse is to be housed in the building and will be operated by the Cuneo brothers, now props of the Wigwam theatre. (*Bakersfield Californian*, Apr 21, 1916, p 1)

³ City Directory for 1929 listed the following theaters: California Theater, 1810 Chester Ave.; Hippodrome Theater, 2024 Chester Ave.; Nile Theater, 1719 19th St.; Rex Theater, 1305 19th St.; Virginia Theater, 1224 19th St.; New Mission Theater, 722 Baker St; Rialto Theater 960 Baker St. The Granada had not yet opened. The Granada's first wrestling and boxing matches were held in 1933. (*Bakersfield Californian*, Jan 16, 1933)



Architects Symmes & Cullimore, builder H.H. Brown. Marquee in Cullimore's drawing: *The Gaucho*, Douglas Fairbanks. (It premiered Nov 21, 1927 in New York.) The Granada was scheduled for completion by January 1, 1929.⁴

By the Seventies the good times were over. The theater went through some rough times that nearly damaged it beyond repair." Transients were in here off-and-on for about 20 years." says Spohn." They burned the projector, the screen, 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 loves the old movie house, and he'd 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 I said, 'Give me 30 days, and we'll put on a show for you.'

⁴ *Bakersfield Californian*, Sep 20, 1928

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 the movie was over we had some vaudeville with Jimmy on the sax. [Jimmy Narducci is Spohn's brother-in-law]. The City guys were satisfied after that."

Spohn starts our tour with the theater's Art Deco-inspired snack-bar nook: "The old theaters didn't originally sell popcorn and drinks.⁵ This space was originally a dress shop next door to the theater. Then around 1946 they changed it over. These sliding doors that separate the snack bar from the main lobby came from the old Maitia's restaurant, and they fit perfectly. The things I'm going to show you I've 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. Then we got the theater."

The tiny lobby houses two small organs. Spohn tells us he'd apprenticed 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 mention a famous pipe organ, he says, "Scotty's Castle. I rebuilt that one." Someone asks, "How about Catalina Island?" Spohn: "I rebuilt the casino organ there." Locally, Spohn takes care of 22 church organs, and he once did Disneyland's carousel organs, but he says, "I haven't been there in two years because they use tape recorders now."

Spohn's prized possession in the lobby is not an organ at all but an instrument called the Lobby Wurlitzer Player. "The device came from Cecil B. De Mille's mansion," says Spohn. "The Wurlitzer company made only seven, and I've rebuilt all of them. The machine was popular in the '20s because there was not much in the way of radio, and there were

⁵ Granada advertising in 1929 mentioned a "confectionary" in the theater.

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 tiny pneumatic bellows. It's 100 percent air-operated by an electric vacuum motor."



This billing suggests that when the Granada opened, it played the Jazz Singer.⁶

He motions to another console 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 October 1927, sound caught on in a hurry, and before long there was no use for

⁶ *Bakersfield Californian*, Feb 30, 1929

theater pipe organs.⁷ 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." Spohn escorts us into the theater. The Granada is a 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 '50s." He grins mischievously. "I like to fiddle with very high-tech stuff. I now have a record of the frescos that are under that paint. Thank God I don't glow in the dark!" Wagner Paint Company volunteered give Spohn the right paint for the 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 lead 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!"

⁷ The Granada first opened on Mar 1, 1929, and it expected to offer talkies by spring, (*Bakersfield Californian*, Feb 30, 1929); *The Canary Murder Case* with William Powell, (*Bakersfield Californian*, May 15, 1929).

We go into one of the narrow storage rooms. Spohn cautions us to watch our heads. The long chamber is jammed, floor-to-ceiling, with individual lengths of organ pipe ranging from the size of a pencil to the size of a building column. "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 'em you can't absorb the lead unless you chew on the pipes or rub them on your nose. "

A pipe's shape and composition influence its unique sound: Wood pipes can imitate trombones; tall, skinny pipes can mimic flutes. The sound room also has real trumpets, violins, tubas, and other instruments that we can't quite see. Spohn gestures to the other storage room on the opposite wall 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. Its got the sax, tympani, clarinet, and glockenspiel..."

Spohn takes us down to the big console in front. "This keyboard is from the old California Theater that was built in 1928." He treats us to an impromptu, silent film, mini-concert while telling us 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 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 to his right where shutters are rhythmically fluttering like the elephant ears in a Tarzan movie. "When I want more sound, I just push down the pedal here, and the shutters open. It lets out more volume. The keyboard here is electro pneumatic-- just switches. Early organs didn't use electricity. This air-operated, electrical switching system came later. The keys activate the appropriate pipes for selected pitches."

Inside the theater's Exit hallway Spohn shows us the organ's original switching system. An electrical cable connects the console keyboard to the switching system, which masters the delivery of air to the organ's pipes. "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 comes the stage. "Half the curtains here are from 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 '50s they jack hammered the corbels to install a 'Cycloramic' wide screen for the Granada. I reproduced those new corbels for the restoration. There're lots of things like that that eat up a tremendous amount of time."

He leads us up a narrow staircase to the mezzanine. A street-sign-size window looks down to the theater below: "Men smoked up here," says Spohn. On this level, too, is the theater projection room with its fire-proof concrete walls. Spohn says celluloid film and carbon-arc projectors are dangerous combinations.

He has two of the old projectors, a 35-mm and a 16-mm. Why keep them? Spohn answers, "It's about bringing the movies to life. Zeon

lamps are standard nowadays, but they're no good for color movies, so I use the old carbon-arc projector. It continually arc-welds, so to speak." He starts the projector, and we immediately feel the heat. He cracks open an inspection door, and an intense, white light floods the room. "Don't look at it directly! It's like an electric welder. This technology is still used in India. The color you get from this projector is just superior. Yah, I have to be careful of fire, and it's hard to find carbons for them, but the result is worth it." Spohn spools up a trailer for Tom Hanks' weeper *The Green Mile*, and its color beats any movie theater in town--crystal clear, lush and vibrant.

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

Spohn leads us over to his workroom that was once the theater's nursery between the men's and women's mezzanines. What a great idea: A place to take kids when they can't handle sitting quietly. The space flows into the women's lounge, now a storage room. "It originally held three vanity tables for primping," says Spohn.

The work bench has organ pipes from the Scottish Rites Temple in Pasadena and a Movie-Ola projector that he tells us was donated "by the Disney people." One of our group asks, "Why did you get the Movie-Ola?" Spohn: "Because, #1, I could get it; and, #2, I'm a film nut." (The Movie-Ola makes it possible for Spohn to check splices, do edits, and make repairs on his 35mm film collection.)

It doesn't surprise us that there's a little practice organ in the workroom. Spohn explains that the big one down in the theater uses a lot of electricity and suffers from wear and tear. He fires up the little organ and rips off a few notes.

On his right is a step-by-step switching system for telephones, which is another of Spohn's many interests. He demonstrates 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 work."

We're eager to join in Spohn's amazing adventure. But he's 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 am in my underwear, then I want to be able to do it!" We understand but are not complete disappointed. We know that as long as Spohn thrives on sharing his old technology and history, then we'll be invited back to the old Granada. We loved the tour.