

Obituary: Jared Jacobsen, former civic organist, to be celebrated at special Spreckels Organ concert



Jared Jacobsen, the civic organist from 1978 to 1985, plays the Spreckels Organ for a tour group in 2016. Jacobsen, who died in a car crash on Aug. 27, will be honored Nov. 23 with a celebration of life concert at the Spreckels Organ Pavilion. (Howard Lipin/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Jacobsen — who lived in Point Loma and died in a car accident on Aug. 27 near Geneva, Ohio — left an indelible imprint in San Diego and Chautauqua, N.Y.

By MICHAEL JAMES ROCHA

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Jared Jacobsen lived a life filled with beautiful music. Most of the time, he was the one playing it.

From the idyllic lake shores of western New York state to the sandy shores of the California coast, he touched the lives of many. All seemingly affected, in a good way, by Jacobsen's love of music.

In Chautauqua, N.Y., at the esteemed Chautauqua Institution, every summer, his organ music ushered in the dawn of each day. In San Diego, as the shepherd of Spreckels Organ in Balboa Park, his Sunday concerts became a Sabbath day tradition for many.

Jacobsen, who lived in Point Loma, died in a car accident on Aug. 27 when his sport-utility vehicle collided with a garbage truck on Route 84 near Geneva, Ohio. He was 70.

On Tuesday, the San Diego City Council is expected to adjourn in his honor. And on Nov. 23, a concert will be held at Spreckels Organ Pavilion to celebrate his life.

"He was very charismatic," longtime friend Lyle Blackinton said. "He didn't play down to an audience but he brought them alongside him."

Jacobsen's passion for music goes as far back as his early childhood when, at the age of 5, he learned to play piano at Chautauqua Institution, where he returned for 65 summers and served as organist and coordinator of worship and sacred music for nearly a quarter of a century.

In San Diego, he was known for his commitment to keeping the city's famed Spreckels Organ relevant, serving as the city's fifth civic organist from 1978 to 1985. He was also director of music for First Lutheran Church in downtown San Diego, and most recently was a member of the performing arts faculty at The Bishop's School in La Jolla.

Jacobsen's last concert on the Spreckels Organ was held Jan. 1, when he played a program that featured Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor, BWV 565, and Ravel's "Bolero," which he transcribed for the organ.

The concert on Nov. 23 will mirror selections from that New Year's Day concert, Jacobsen's 370th performance at Spreckels Organ Pavilion.

At the time of his death, Jacobsen served on the board of trustees of the Spreckels Organ Society, the all-volunteer nonprofit that has, since 1988, championed the 104-year-old pipe organ, the world's largest in a fully outdoor venue.

As curator emeritus for the Spreckels Organ, Blackinton worked closely with Jacobsen — "I maintained the instrument for the city, and Jared was the artist."

That friendship spanned 40 years, and it produced many memories. But if Blackinton could sum up Jacobsen's legacy in one sentence, it would be this: "Jared was the spark plug that laid the foundation for what we enjoy today as the Spreckels Organ."

"Back in the late '70s," Blackinton recalled, "the Spreckels Organ was in a state of disrepair, and there was a lack of interest in the general public. There was talk of demolishing the pavilion for more Balboa Park parking."

The Committee of One Hundred — a group formed in 1967 to preserve Balboa Park and its historic buildings — "realized the organ and the pavilion building were in need of repair," Blackinton said. "Jared collaborated with the group and raised interest in preserving the organ. ... He provided the foundation that led to the rebirth of the Spreckels Organ."

'Seismic force'

Jacobsen was born in New Castle, Penn., in 1949, the son of Janes C. and Alice G. Jacobsen and brother of Jan and Joel. He grew up in Girard, about an hour from New Castle, and graduated in 1967 from Girard High School, second in his class.

He earned a bachelor's degree in music from Westminster College in New Wilmington, Penn. During the summers, he studied piano with concert pianists and Liszt specialists Ozan and Patricia

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Benkman Marsh. In the winters, they were based at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Jacobsen wanted more time with his mentors, so he enrolled full-time and eventually graduated with a master's degree in music from the University of Arizona before pursuing a doctorate in keyboard performance and choral studies, also in Arizona.

He moved to San Diego in 1976 to become director of music at St. James by-the-Sea Episcopal Church in La Jolla. He was appointed the city's civic organist two years later. For six years, starting in 1985, he lived in the Bay Area, where he worked as liturgy and music director for St. Leander Catholic Parish Community Church in San Leandro. His tenure there, according to the Spreckels Organ Society, gave Jacobsen the opportunity to play the organ for Pope John Paul II during the papal mass at San Francisco's Candlestick Park in 1987.

In Chautauqua, he played on the 112-year-old Massey Memorial Organ at the Chautauqua Amphitheater. Jacobsen closed the Chautauqua season on Aug. 25, and he passed away two days later.

Michael Hill, president of Chautauqua Institution, shared the news with the community in an Aug. 28 letter, saying: "Many have described Jared and the music he masterfully created with the iconic Massey Memorial Organ at the Chautauqua Amphitheater as the 'heart and soul' of Chautauqua. This sentiment speaks not only to Jared's talent, but of his ever-presence during our summer assembly season, his untiring love for music, and his generous willingness to share his passions with Chautauquans across generations."



Jared Jacobsen, the civic organist from 1978 to 1985, will be honored at a special Spreckels Organ concert on Nov. 23. (Courtesy photo)

Speaking by phone from Chautauqua, Hill said: "Jared was a seismic force here at Chautauqua," from his early childhood as a young pianist to the early 1990s when he became the principal organist and choir master. "He was at the center of every worship, and generations of people who come here every summer only have experiences with him behind the organ. It's a massive loss."

Hill added: "While he was a renowned musician, Jared's imprint is actually exponentially larger than that. ... Since his passing, I've received letters from people from all walks of life — from the chaplain to Her Majesty the Queen of England to people he taught as boys and girls from when they were 3 or 4. ... For us, it's beyond a long-term staff member going. He was deeply embedded in the fabric of what we did and the spirit of the place."

'A natural'

In 2016, during an insider's tour of the then-101-year-old Spreckels Organ, Jacobsen performed in front of nearly a hundred people who sat in folding chairs on the pavilion stage while he played four songs.

"This is the most amazing instrument," Jacobsen said to them. "I'm still finding out things it can do."

It's that sense of awe and wonderment that led Jeff Long, a columnist for the Southeast Missourian, to lament Jacobsen's passing. In a column, Long wrote about his trips to Chautauqua with his wife and being witness to "Jacobsen's instrumental mastery over most of the 40 years we've been attending Chautauqua events."

"Jacobsen was a world-class organist and hosted the Sacred Song Service each Sunday evening during the nine-week Chautauqua season," Long wrote in a column published Sept. 21. "The 70-year old Jacobsen sat with his back to the audience, and we watched his wizardry, fingers flying all over the keys, hands pulling out stops, feet massaging pedals. He made that instrument, said to be the largest open-air organ east of the Mississippi, his own — capping off those Sabbath night worship experiences with his thrilling interpretation of 'Largo,' from G.F. Handel's opera 'Xerxes.'"

Louise Carmon, who worked with Jacobsen for 18 years at The Bishop's School, recalled him as "an amazing man, musician and colleague. I don't know a more sincere, gentle, kind and multi-talented individual. He was always there to lend a hand (or two), give a listening and sympathetic ear, and was there to passionately share his love of music."

Such praise doesn't surprise longtime friend Blackinton.

"Jared was a very special person," he said. "Very outgoing. Very knowledgeable. His verbal skills were equal to his musical skills. He was able to capture an audience with his verbal skills and introduce them to music that they may not be familiar with. He always used to say, 'You don't have to like it, but you have to hear it once.'"

"He was a natural. He had a very relaxed stage demeanor. There was a quiet energy to what he did, and it was wonderful to see."

Writer Lois Vidaver considered herself lucky for seeing Jacobsen's music magic firsthand.

In a column for The Buffalo News, Vidaver wrote about covering Jacobsen when she worked for the Chautauquan Daily for four summers. She saved many of the articles and, in her Sept. 3 column, recalled a conversation in 2005 when Jacobsen was preparing to close the Chautauqua season:

"As I came down lower Forest and saw the lake in front of me, it was just one of those perfect Chautauqua days," he said as he walked his beloved dog, Pierrot. "I said to the dog, 'What would happen if we just stayed here and didn't go back to San Diego?' and he sort of looked at me and wagged his tail and kept on going."

Celebration of Life Concert: Jared Jacobsen

When: 5 p.m. Nov. 23

Where: Spreckels Organ Pavilion, Balboa Park

Admission: Free

Online: spreckelsorgan.org

Memorial services for Jared Jacobsen, who has no known survivors, have been held both in Chautauqua, N.Y., and San Diego.