

## SILENT MUSIC MAN

*by Joan Black*

As the Theater lights gradually dimmed the seated crowd would slowly hush their whisperings, settle comfortably back in their seats and applaud as a spotlight from high in back of the balcony focused its beam on the old up-right piano situated just left of center on the stage.

From the Wings walked a man in formal attire and, with a practiced flip of the coat tails, he would take his place on the piano bench. For the next 15-20 minutes the audience would be treated to a musical extravaganza, usually popular tunes of the day with some Oldies thrown in for good measure. A screen would descend and words to the song would appear and everyone invited to follow the bouncing ball and sing along.

This was always the prelude to The Big Event, The Feature Presentation. Tonight we would watch a whole hour of black and white flickerings as Mary Pickford batted her eyelashes at Douglas Fairbanks or Savage Indians brandishing tom-a-hawks thundered after fleeing Cowboys. But we could not hear Mary's simperings or the heavy breathing of the handsome hero nor would the horses' hooves make any noise and there would not be any wild war whoops because these were the Silent Movies. Oh sure, captions of dialogue flashed across the bottom of the screen, but far better than any conversations was the descriptive music of The Piano Player. He could tug at your heartstrings with his sad arpeggios as the heroine shed silent tears or make your heart beat faster as he pounded out a stirring march as the gallant hero came to her rescue. Surely Rossini had those galloping Indians in mind when he wrote The William Tell Overture and Claire de Lune was composed solely for lovesick maidens. The Storm sequence from Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony accompanied every raindrop, lightning strike and thunder clap that ever poured from threatening skies.

Accompanists were supposed to play set music on cue as provided by the Film Producer, but often times such instructions failed to arrive and the Pianist would improvise or ad lib what he thought was more appropriate music. As a 4/5 year old I was unable to read the flashing captions and was repeatedly shushed when I tugged on Poppa's arm and whispered "What did he say?"

So I learned early on to listen to the Piano Player – his nimble fingers could translate moods, scenes, actions. Without his music the movie was 'flat' – his talents were needed to flesh out the 2-dimensional images and make them come alive with passion, bravery, terror, fearfulness, sadness, even death.

Alas, time marches on – by 1926 the first "Talkie" The Jazz Singer, was produced and the ubiquitous Movie Pianist did a slow fade to black.