The jolly sounds of organ pipes are slowly slipping to extinction at Major League ballparks across the country. Organists have seen their game time cut to a mere fifth of what they used to play, and some have disappeared altogether, replaced by DJ stations and comprehensive digital music libraries.

More than half of the 30 Major League Baseball teams have some form of organ music during a game, but only a handful of teams, including the Chicago Cubs and Los Angeles Dodgers, actually feature the organ as the primary music throughout game festivities. Prepackaged rock jam compilations and interactive video scoreboards with digital characters and blooper reels are a few of the high-tech wonders that have slowly phased out the mighty Wurlitzer’s and the classic Hammond organs that defined American baseball in the past. Dwayne Hilton, 35, a relative newcomer to the world of ballpark organists, is one of the faithful few, still plugging along on his Lowery Prestige (A5000) organ, enjoying a great opportunity to marry a love of music with an enthusiasm for America’s favorite pastime. “One of the biggest reasons I enjoy playing the organ is the tradition,” says Hilton, who plays 10 home games a month in Busch Stadium for the St. Louis Cardinals. “It is very nostalgic in baseball, since the first organ was introduced in the early ‘40s, and it’s become a traditional thing to hear.” Hilton splits his ballpark hours with legendary organist Ernie Hays, who has been at the stadium for more than 30 years, and is now semi-retired. When he’s not entertaining a crowd of the 40,000 “best fans in baseball,” Hilton is a partner in Lacefield Music, a store in St. Louis, Missouri, that sells pianos, organs, and keyboards. “The St. Louis Cardinals are a great family and they are so supportive of me and my music,” says Hilton. “I work for the two best companies in the world. I feel so privileged—

I’ve been following the Cardinals since I was born.” Growing up in Southeast Missouri, Hilton took piano lessons and picked up the organ on his family’s old Thomas Organ. Hilton studied piano at Southwest Missouri State, and soon after, landed a job with Lacefield Music. If it hadn’t been for Lacefield, Hilton may have never had the opportunity to play the organ for the Cardinals.

The Natural
Back in 2008, Hilton was at Lacefield when he received a call from the St. Louis Cardinals inquiring whether or not the store sold organs. Hilton was more than happy to bring some models to the stadium and demonstrate their quality to the Cardinals’ staff. “After I showed them the organs they said, ‘Not only will we take the organ, but would you like to play for us, too?’” says Hilton. Just two short weeks later, Hilton played his first game.

Besides the classics, “Take Me Out to the Ball Game,” “The Star Spangled Banner,” and “Here Comes the King,” a Budweiser jingle traditionally played during the 7th inning stretch of every home game, Hilton was welcome to play just about Nerves didn’t get the best of Hilton on his first “at bat” behind the organ in the Cardinals’ press box. Rather, it was the timing that was a bit tricky to master. “Once a pitcher steps on the mound, or a batter is in the box, the music has to be totally killed,” says Hilton. “One has to be aware of the game at all times and what’s going on.”
Hilton also has to coordinate with the DJ, video board, and game announcers, as well as calculate what songs can be played comfortably through a commercial break without being cut off in the middle. Another challenge is reading whether or not a base hit will be a single or a double. "I have to watch and see when the cutoff man gets it before I start the fanfare, so I'm not playing while the action is going on," says Hilton.

The time allotted for the organ at Busch Stadium is fairly generous including 45 minutes of pre-game tunes, 20 minutes of post-game ditties, and interactive game chants and clap-along throughout the game and between innings.

Before the game, Hilton plays songs that appeal to all ages, including classics from the '40s and '50s like "Rock Around the Clock," disco songs, upbeat Beatles tunes like "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da," and '70s rock classics. To top it off, Hilton will sprinkle in some fun '80s jams like Van Halen's "Jump" or some pop tunes from the radio. "I definitely keep things upbeat and happy," says Hilton. After the game, depending on whether it was a win or a loss, Hilton will play songs like U2's "Beautiful Day," or Garth Brooks', "Friends in Low Places."

Throughout the game, Hilton plays little clap-a-long chants and songs like "Charge," or "Here We Go Cardinals." "Rather than canned music, a person can play things quickly, off-the-cuff to fit the appropriate moment in baseball," says Hilton. "There is this personal connection; it's such a great rush to have this crowd of 40,000 respond, whether they are clapping, singing, or having a good time."

**Field of Dreams**

Unlike some of his predecessors, Hilton has not yet had the chance to showcase a ballpark organist's somewhat quirky sense of humor. Some infamous ballpark incidents include a Philadelphia Phillies' keyboardist playing Peggy Lee's "Is that All There Is?" when a fan streaked across the field during a game in the '70s, or ballpark organist Wilbur Snapp being ejected from the game for playing "Three Blind Mice" after a questionable call. "Organists most definitely have a special sense of humor," says Hilton. "It's fun to be spontaneous, but no, I've not been kicked out of a baseball game for doing such things, yet."

Despite the growing pessimism that ballpark organists are slowly on their way out, Hilton is confident that the St. Louis Cardinals value the tradition. "I can't speak for other teams, but there is a lot of support for the organ in St. Louis," says Hilton. "They are not looking to replace it anytime soon."