



## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### AFTERMATH DEPT.

by Joshua Hersh  
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On a recent Friday afternoon, Anthony Meloni was in his sun-filled workshop in Port Chester, New York, forty-five minutes north of Manhattan, cleaning a pipe organ. More precisely, he was supervising the cleaning. He had recently broken his right arm—the result of an unfortunate incident involving a wet roof, a late-night drink, and a flight of stairs (“It wasn’t a pretty picture,” he said with a sigh)—so he mostly paced around the room, smoking cigarettes and looking over the shoulders of his three apprentices.



The instrument was one he knew well. He used to spend several hours tuning it every Friday. That was before September 11, 2001. The organ, which belongs

to Trinity Church on lower Broadway, had been damaged during the destruction of the World Trade Center. When the first tower collapsed, the sanctuary filled with the dark smoke and dust that covered much of downtown Manhattan. Fine particles filtered into the organ, clogging its nine thousand pipes and corroding its leather parts (gussets and valves). In late 2002, after months of haggling with insurance companies, Trinity disassembled the organ and deposited it in the church’s basement. It seemed to Meloni that he might never work on the instrument again.

Owen Burdick, Trinity’s organist and director of music, thinks the church may have found something better: an all-digital organ, installed in 2003 as an “interim” solution, which has been a surprise hit. (It has standard consoles for playing, but no pipes; its software runs on the Linux operating system.) In July, Burdick demonstrated it at the American Guild of Organists convention in Chicago, where it received a standing ovation. “It can do a lot of things a pipe organ can’t,” Burdick says.

Meloni isn’t persuaded. “It’s the best electronic organ I’ve ever heard,” he said. “But Trinity deserves better.” So he was pleased when someone from the church called and asked him to prepare an exhibit of the organ’s parts—some cleaned and restored, others left in their post-September 11th state—in honor of that day’s fifth anniversary. Early last month, Meloni parked a rented truck outside Trinity, threw a handful of organ parts—a swell engine, a section of the stop action, a couple of pipe racks, two hundred and fifty pipes—into the back, and hauled them up to Port Chester.

Meloni, who is fifty-three years old, has ragged, Beethoven-style hair and an abundance of manic energy. In his cluttered studio, a row of pipes made of a tin-and-lead alloy that has the visual

effect of cheetah’s fur leaned against one wall. A zinc set from the nineteen-fifties covered a table, lined up like ammunition.

Pipes can be fabricated to mimic a variety of musical sounds, Meloni explained. “There’s the clarinet, the krumphorn, Renaissance instruments, orchestral instruments. Some guy in the nineteenth century invented a saxophone pipe.” Crafting these pipes is a delicate process, and cleaning can require creativity. “Some pipes have reeds with a vibrating tongue inside them,” he said. “There are tricks to getting a piece of debris out: you blow on it, or you take a dollar bill and stick it between the reed tongue and the shallot.”

When Meloni first tried to clean dust off the Trinity organ, four years ago, before it was dismantled, the filth proved particularly resistant. “It’s not typical dust from sitting around thirty years,” he said. “It’s whitish, greasy. It was impossible to vacuum.” The grime was also heavy with jet fuel, biological matter, and, especially, corrosive building materials. The church hired an expert—a “doctor of dust” named Harley Piltingsrud—to evaluate the organ for insurance purposes. Piltingsrud found that the dust was unusually alkaline. (Other reports had compared the debris to Drano.)

Five years on, Meloni’s team doesn’t seem the least bit squeamish. A pile of green latex gloves sat unused on a table, and no one wore a face mask. Toward the back of the room, Craig Van Orsdale, one of Meloni’s employees, was polishing a set of small pipes, the thinnest of which was about the width of a pencil. The night before, the pipes had soaked in a solution of warm water and Cascade. Meloni picked up one of the pipes. He put his lips to it and blew. It sounded a little like a flute.