

# HARP LADY

by Whitney Balliett

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Wherever she goes, Daphne camps out. She even slips in and out of her names. She was born Daphne Bayne but became Daphne Bull. After that, she was Daphne Hellman, then Daphne Shih. Now she is known by her friends and colleagues simply as Daphne. They all know who they are talking about when they run into one another and say "How's Daphne?" or "Daphne has a bad cold" or "Daphne just left for Australia." She is a woman of means, who owns three houses—one in the East Sixties; one on a hilltop in St. James, Long Island; and one on another hilltop, in Truro, on Cape Cod—but she never stays in any of them long. She may light in Manhattan for four or five days, then drive out to St. James, but only for a night or two. (Her adopted son, Digger St. John, lives there.) Or she'll run down South for a series of one-nighters with her trio, Hellman's Angels (Daphne on harp, Eddie Berg on guitar, Lyn Christie on bass). Or she'll do Russia or India or Australia or Sri Lanka with the trio. Or she'll look in on her son Benjy Bull, a greatly talented guitarist, who lives in Brentwood, California. Or she'll run over to Paris for a couple of weeks and play her harp on the street with the violinist Colette Lepage and the bassist Jack Gregg. (Daphne's daughter, Daisy Paradis, a gifted sitar player, is living there now, too.) Or she'll go on an Earthwatch expedition to Kenya or Madagascar or China or Panama. But there are three absolutes in her life: New York (through her Bayne Fund she contributes to the Metropolitan Museum, the American Museum of Natural History, the Bronx Zoo, and the Museum of the City of New York); the harp; and the Village Gate, where she has appeared every Tuesday (when she is in town) for twenty-eight years. (It may be the longest-running night-club gig in the history of New York.)

On a recent Tuesday morning, not long after she had taken her daily outing on roller skates, Daphne talked about harps and harpists in her New York living room: "Everyone knows what a harp looks like, but not many people know how difficult it is to play. There are six or seven octaves on the average concert harp, and each octave has seven strings. The strings are colored: the C's are red, the F's blue, and so on. Without this, it would be hard to tell where you are. You pluck the strings with your thumbs and with the first three fingers of each hand—the pinkies are too short and weak. The strings are regulated by seven pedals, placed in a semi-circle at the base of the post and attached to rods inside the post, which are hooked to the strings by little pins. One pedal controls the C strings, one the D's, and so forth. Each pedal can be depressed two notches, and each notch shortens the string a half-tone. The harp is tuned in C-flat, so if you depress the C pedal one notch you get a C, and two notches gives you a C-sharp. That is the great difficulty of harp playing: you have to think with your feet.

"There are eight thousand harpists in this country and they make a cozy, intense world. Harpists work in symphony orchestras and in the studios and in hotels and leisure places. A good gold concert harp can cost twenty thousand dollars. I'm lucky enough to be able to buy harps, and I keep one here, one in St. James, and one in Truro. There's another at the Metropolis Cafe, on Union Square, where I play Sunday lunches, one at the Gate, and one at Kitty O'Shea's little restaurant near my house. I also have a travelling harp in my van. And I've rented one out to the 'Fantasticks' company for years, at eighty dollars a month."

Daphne's living room is nearly two stories high and has floor-to-ceiling windows on the south which look into a garden. A gold harp, an upright piano, an electric keyboard, and a Gravikord were gathered against the east side of the room. (The Gravikord is a stringed instrument shaped like a fishing rod which was invented by her friend the trombonist Bob Grawi. She uses it when she plays in the subway.) On the walls were a William Burroughs abstraction, a Warren Miller cartoon of a big band made up of eighteen accordionists and a drummer, an early Paul Resika oil of a Cape Cod beach, a Saul Steinberg interior, an Al Hirschfeld drawing of Daphne at her harp, and, in a corner, a small Robert White terra-cotta sculpture of Digger St. John. Daphne does not believe in spending money on furniture, and the various pieces in the room looked exhausted. She loves birds, and on an end table next to her was a big birdcage containing an African glossy starling. She





*Hellman's Angels at the Village Gate, 1986*

said that she bought the bird thirteen years ago, and that it not only sings, it barks. She also said that she had owned an English blackbird that sang at four-thirty every morning in the spring. At one time, she had so many large birds in the living room and adjacent kitchen that they tended to shout the humans, causing her old friend Rogers Whitaker to describe the place as “helter-skelter palace.” Daphne herself is birdlike. She has a narrow, handsome face and short blond hair. Although she probably weighs under a hundred pounds, she is still shapely, and has a firm grip and a viola voice. She loves to laugh, and she talks with the explosive frankness of someone who has taken long inward looks and found what she saw acceptable.

“My mother was responsible for getting me started on the harp,” she continued. “I was born in New York, in 1915, right in my parents’ apartment, at 820 Park. I had a sister, Betty, who was four years older. When I was seven and she was eleven, our parents moved us to Morristown, New Jersey, so that we wouldn’t get any more colds, but, of course, we got everything. My father’s name was Howard Bayne. He was one of five children, and he was born in Ireland. His father, Samuel Bayne, had a house on Riverside Drive, and he had a parrot that bit us and laughed when we cried. My father’s sister Emily married an English architect and member of Parliament, Lord Alfred Bossom. When Winston Churchill first heard the name, he asked how to spell it, and said, ‘Well, it’s neither one nor the other, is

it?’ My father was handsome and short and straight-featured. He had a flashing smile and blue-green eyes. He liked to drink, and when he did he became conversational. When he was in his late sixties, he was told to stop drinking and smoking, but it didn’t work for him. He had wanted to be an electrical engineer, but his father made him go into banking, and he did. My grandfather had a hand in founding the Chase Manhattan Bank, and he had also worked in the oil fields and published a book about it, called ‘Derricks of Destiny.’ My mother was Louise Van Beuren, and she was born at 21 West Fourteenth Street. One of her brothers was a surgeon at Presbyterian Hospital, and another cut a swath in Newport. My mother had mucho money. I adored her when I was little. She was not pretty, but she was tall and vivacious and had expressive eyebrows. She talked a great deal. My sister and I were very close, but we each had our own governess, and they were rather mean to us. Mine made me take long, lonely walks, and she didn’t like me to see my friends. But of course we learned to speak French. When I was around nine, Mother started to be critical of everything—whether we were clean, how we dressed, our manners. I took refuge in animals. I began collecting bats, which I’d find behind shutters. I still love them. They are much maligned and misunderstood. And I sent away for armadillos.”

When she was ten, Daphne kept a diary, and she still has it. It has a nice Daisy Ashford ring. Here is her first meeting with a bat (the entry is dated Friday, April 3, 1925; the place is Morristown): “One morning I woke up and went to see my pets, and looking in my basin of fish I saw two dark objects trying to get out. I took them and put them on my pillow and petted [sic] and kissed them but one bit me. I looked closely [sic] and saw that my visitors had wings and very big ears, a darling but very wicked face, sharp white teeth, sharp claws and soft brown fur. Now that they were dry I saw that they were bats. Evidently they had flown in the window and trying to get a drink, fell in for bats need much water. Then they flew around the room and we put blankets around our heads for fear they should get in our hair. They got behind the screens and scratched themselves then hunched on to the heater and made faces at us. That afternoon I caught them and let them go. They looked like spiders when they were on the floor.”

Leaning forward, Daphne continued, “I went first to the Peck School, in Morristown, then to Ethel Walker’s for a year. I whined that it was too strict, so I was put in Farmington, which I really liked. From there I went to Chapin, in New York, and in the winter of 1933–34 I came out. I decided I wanted to try acting, and I enrolled in the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, and after that I went to the Royal Academy in London for a year. I had a walk-on part in Leslie Howard’s ‘Hamlet,’ in New York, which didn’t get very good reviews. Then I met my first husband, Harry Bull. He was the editor of *Town & Country*, and he was eleven years older than I was. My family didn’t think much of Harry, but I married him anyway. I was twenty-one. He was a



strange man, very sarcastic, but I was an awful wife. Unfaithful. I modelled for *Harper's Bazaar* and for *Town & Country*. I modelled for Man Ray. Jerome Zerbe photographed me. I was a cover girl. I started to dye my hair blond and tried to look like Veronica Lake.

"I had a stillborn child in 1939 because I was Rh-negative; then Benjy Bull was born. In 1940, I fell in love with Geoffrey Hellman, a *New Yorker* writer. He was a tall lighthouse of a fellow whose only sin was eating. When Benjy was two, Harry Bull, who had detectives watching Geoffrey and me, quit *Town & Country*, kidnapped Benjy, and moved to Florida. Benjy didn't live with me again until he was ten. Geoffrey and I were married in Reno in 1941, and his mother came on our honeymoon. My sister married three money men, and I married three literary men. Geoffrey was in the O.S.S. during the war, and we lived in Washington, D.C., and got to know people like Eddie Newhouse and Saul Steinberg and Robert Lewis Taylor. I had taken classical harp lessons with Mildred Dilling for years, but had given up the harp in my teens; the Spanish harpist Nicanor Zabaleta had a great deal to do with getting me back to it. When we returned to New York after the war, I played in a concert at Town Hall with the diseuse Marianne Oswald. *Time* said I was 'as curvesome as a treble clef.' I began getting a lot of work as a harpist. In the fifties I started studying jazz harp with Phyllis Pinkerton, who had been taught by Lennie Tristano. She made me sing intervals and clap two against three and practice with a metronome. She made me sing along with Lester Young records, then sing the solos without the



Daphne Hellman and her group on tour of Vietnam, Sri Lanka, and Australia in 1971

records. And she made me play along with his solos, then play them by myself.

"I played with Ving Merlin and his All-Girl Band at the Hotel New Yorker, and I was at Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe. Then I came under Julius Monk's jovial management, and worked at the Upstairs at the Downstairs with Julius and Stella Brooks and Imogene Coca and Blossom Dearie and Annie Ross. And I worked at the Ruban Bleu and the Versailles and Le Perroquet. Summers, we all went to the Atlantic House in Provincetown. Norman Mailer was there, and Tennessee Williams, and Hugh Shannon. Daisy Hellman was born to Geoffrey and me in 1946, and in 1951 I adopted Digger St. John. He was a three-year-old Irish baby, and I found him largely through John McCarten's sister, who lived in Ireland. Geoffrey had a lot of lady friends and I had men friends, and we made the mistake of telling each other what we were doing. Geoffrey decided, finally, that he wanted a divorce, and he remarried. In 1961, I married Hsio-Wen Shih, a brilliant architect and writer but one day in 1965 he just disappeared. I was devastated. People have told me that they have seen him in England, but I have never heard a word from him since, and he has never touched a penny of the trust fund I set up for him. I have had a lot of beaux since then—an art dealer, a psychiatrist, a writer—but I'm still married to Wen."

People love to talk about Daphne. Here are three voices. The first belongs to Marty Hall, a painter who divides her time between a tiny apartment in the East Eighties and a house she shares in Wellfleet with her husband, Jack, who is also a painter. "I like Daphne because she's an original, and she has this enormous energy," she said the other day. "I like it that she has played the harp so eclectically. She's a total performer. She's headstrong, and she does what she wants. Jack remembers her from dancing-school days in New York. She was very beautiful and very shy. Up until about ten years ago, this shyness made it difficult to carry on a relaxed conversation with her, particularly on the telephone. But in groups she has always had great social poise. I think she must be deeply lonely, or she wouldn't run so."

The second voice is that of the pianist and producer Julius Monk, who is retired and lives under the eaves of the Parc Vendome, on West Fifty-seventh Street. He is a courtly Southerner who speaks in the old orotund way: "I think I gave Daphne her first professional job. It was at the Ruban Bleu when it was in the Hotel Langdon, at Fifty-sixth and Fifth. The war was still on, and Geoffrey was in Washington. She took a tiny suite in the hotel, and on opening night there was this blond goddess, this tableau on that tiny stage. After the war, we played at the Boeuf sur la Toit in Paris. We did Jerome Kern, and to keep her out of trouble we glissed a great deal. Daphne worked the Ruban Bleu twice a year, and once when she was there we hired Billie Holiday. I believe it was Billie's East Side debut, and we had a terrible time with her opening night, because she was zonked and





Daphne Hellman, Baby Dee, and Mr. Spoons at the Village Gate

refused to share our only dressing room with Daphne. She said, "I'm not going in that dressing room with that East Side lady"—only she didn't use the word 'lady.' Daphne accepts conditions and people and backgrounds as they are. She faces things and is astonishingly brave. I've seen her do any number of kind things for any number of people. I think at times she has been musically unfulfilled, but she is always questing."

Saul Steinberg issues his extraordinary visions from his studio in Springs, Long Island. He is an acute observer, and his Romanian English makes whatever he says sound like law. "I met Daphne in 1942 or 1943," he said not long ago. "I had my first show in America at Betty Parsons' gallery in New York, and she and Geoffrey came and bought two pictures. That was a big thing, you know. In one of the pictures I made a satire of a *National Geographic* magazine cover—a geographer looking at nudity, which was a big feature of the *Geographic* at that time. I was stationed in Washington briefly in 1945, and I saw her and Geoffrey there. I started going to her parties when she bought her house on the East Side. The living room was very formal and elegant then, and had a winding staircase going down to a big dining room. These parties, sui generis, became a kind of salon. There were writers and musicians and artists and publishers. Geoffrey began to behave like the husband of a woman who keeps a salon. He had the attitude of someone visiting a kindergarten. Then he would retire upstairs to bed. I admired Daphne because she reminded me of one of those hillbilly jeep drivers in the service—skinny, tough, and driving like a cowboy."

The African starling barked, and Daphne told it to be quiet. The bird must have reminded her of Africa and Earthwatch. "Tee Addams, Charlie Addams' widow,

took me on my first Earthwatch expedition, in 1980," she said. "Earthwatch was started in 1971. It asks interested people like me to go on scientific expeditions as paying volunteers and worker-observers. The purpose of our trip was to study the social behavior of the spotted hyena in Kenya. The expedition was run by Dr. Lawrence Frank, of Berkeley, and there were twelve of us, including a college-textbook writer, some arrogant Sierra Club people, and several zoology students. Before you go on any Earthwatch you are given explicit do's and don'ts. I came across the briefing for the Kenya Earthwatch the other day, and here's the cautionary part: 'Don't go into water over your knees. Crocodiles like knees. Don't step out of a vehicle in tall grass without reconnoitering first (lions and other animals are well camouflaged)... Let your ears play their part when you head for the lavatory tent in the middle of the night, bring a flashlight with you, and never assume that because you were someplace yesterday and it was free of animals, it will apply a day or even hours later.' We'd gather in groups of three or four during the day, and go off in a jeep to find hyenas and record what we saw. Dr. Frank wanted something like 'Cub No. 22 walked twelve metres toward its mother, who picked the cub up in her mouth by the nape of its neck,' and not 'A darling cub ran over and nestled up to its adorable mother.'

"I've been on six Earthwatches. Two were bird trips—one to Panama to find the great black-and-white owl and the oropendola, which has a sharp, crowlike beak and looks like a big oriole, and the other to study cranes in the marsh country up near the Chinese-Mongolian border. In China, there were red-cheeked, lusty, loud people who kept pigs in their front yards, and there were visiting Chinese professors housed in miserable barracks. Captive cranes, five feet tall, were used to attract wild cranes, and the captive cranes lived better than the professors. And I've made two trips to Madagascar with the zoologist Alison Jolly to study ring-tailed lemurs." Daphne wrote an account of her second Madagascar trip for the *Bernardsville News*, which covers the area in New Jersey where she grew up. Parts of it are extremely vivid and are written in a kind of Gilbert White prose:

We spent several hours along the rainy rain forest paths, admiring ferns and listening to clear parrot whistles. At last four indri appeared in a clearing, tail-less large grey and white lemurs. They ate leaves thoughtfully from thin trees; then with mighty leaps advanced into the forest where they disappeared.

We drove along several noisy metal bridges, past Amboasary village with its Sunday cattle market, over the Mandrare River into dry country, and continued on a long straight road through sisal plantations to the tin-roofed cement building of the Reserve. A dancing band greeted us with fierce lunging and stamping. A guard wearing a pointed little straw Antandroy hat and whistle in his mouth led the gang. He recognized me from



the Earthwatchers: he embraced me warmly and invited me to prance off with the band.

An accompanying photograph in the paper shows Daphne laughing and dancing arm in arm with the guard, who is brandishing a spear in his right hand.

Daphne played at the Village Gate that evening with her trio. They were set up in the Terrace Bar, which stretches along the front of the Gate on the ground floor. It is a noisy, uncaring place, full of drop-ins and the curious. People talk a lot, and when the music gets in their way they talk louder. Daphne was on a low dais at the east end of the room, with Eddie Berg to her right and Lyn Christie just behind her. During a single, hour-long set, they played ten numbers, among them two Berg originals entitled "Strange" and "Escapade," an Oscar Pettiford blues, "Honeysuckle Rose," "Misty," and Sonny Rollins' "Doxy." The group has built an impressive repertory. It includes discreetly jazzed-up versions of Bach and Scarlatti and Respighi; such country-and-Western numbers as "King of the Road," "Tennessee Waltz," and "Foggy Mountain Breakdown"; ragtime pieces like the "Pineapple Rag," the "Black and White Rag," and "The Entertainer"; and jazz numbers like "Watermelon Man," "Ballin' the Jack," "Summertime," and "Tea for Two." It is a comfortable, nicely balanced group that swings from the inside and has a pleasant,

see-through texture. Daphne's pearly treble figures are offset by Christie's bass, and Berg moves easily between. He is the motor of the group. A fleet admirer of Johnny Smith and Charlie Christian and Django Reinhardt, he is little known in the jazz world and prefers to keep it that way. Daphne plays with regal animation, and when she moves into a difficult ensemble passage or takes a brief improvised solo her jaw muscles flicker. She occasionally hesitates rhythmically, but Berg picks her up, and off they go again.

After the set, Daphne sat at a table and talked. "I think of myself as Miss Harp. I take almost any job that comes along. If I could, I'd work every day. When I don't have a gig, I walk over to Kitty O'Shea's and play there. I like harp playing to be an extension of talking, and I don't like it when I get stuck in a corner or off on a balcony. I do Grand Central and Penn Station and the subway so I can talk to people. I'm partly a manic-depressive, and some days are awful, particularly when I'm tired and haven't had my quota of little naps. But playing lifts me right up and makes me feel good again. So does dancing. I love to dance, and for a time I was a greeter at the Tunnel. I've also worked as a cashier in the five-and-ten. I took the job to see if I was employable, and I was thrilled when I wasn't fired."



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