

on the lighter side

Verlye Mills

by Carrol McLaughlin



Verlye Mills

The vivacious and dynamic Verlye Mills has for many years been an acknowledged master of her art. Considered one of the top studio harpists in Los Angeles, her exceptional talents with rhythm harp, improvisation and arranging have set her apart from other harpists.

Verlye's love of rhythm and the jazz idiom started very early in her career. While she was harpist with the Cleveland Orchestra in the 1930's she had her own dance band, "Verlye Mills and Her Boyfriends." John Royal, the manager of the radio station on which Verlye's band played, became instrumental to Verlye's career when he became the head of NBC in New York. Royal introduced Verlye to Fred Waring, who made her solo harpist with his famous band, then playing in the Roxy Theatre in New York.

Verlye remembers well being the only woman in Fred Waring's seventy-piece ensemble. One of her major re-

sponsibilities in this band and groups such as Richard Himber's Orchestra was to "fill" between pieces while modulating from one key to the key of the next piece. Verlye's natural love of rhythm again made her work exceptional; she would do the fills with strong rhythms and quotes from the pieces, an art greatly appreciated by her fellow musicians.

Verlye's ability to play by ear also was a great asset to her. She was one of the main musicians in many "5-a-week" radio and television shows which aired live five days each week. Often the only instruments used for this were organ and harp or harp and percussion, or, on shows such as the "Faith Baldwin Show," harp alone. It was



A childhood portrait

necessary to have at hand many harp "cues," or to be able to improvise at a second's notice. At one point in New York, Verlye was appearing on four different radio programs, as well as playing solos with radio and television orchestras, such as "Fred Allen," "Hit Parade," "Show Boat," and "Arthur Murray."

It was on the "Phil Spitalny" show that Verlye met her future husband, saxophone player Arnold Brillhart. Other musicians who played with them on that show included Jimmy Dorsey, Tommy Dorsey, Artie Shaw, and Benny Goodman. Arnold Brillhart, whom Verlye married in New York, was the creator of the renowned Brillhart saxophone mouthpieces.

In the 1950's, Verlye Mills and her family moved to the Los Angeles area. For eleven years Verlye played regularly for the "Carol Burnett Show," working with composers and arrangers such as Harry Zimmerman and Peter Matz.

One of the outstanding elements of Verlye's playing is a very precise, strong technique. Her major teacher was Enrico Tramonti, Chicago harpist and teacher of Joseph and Edward Vito. Verlye's mother was a piano instructor, and was very supportive of Verlye's career. At the early age of twelve, Verlye was concerto soloist with the Chicago Symphony performing the *Fantaisie* of Dubois.

In earlier years Verlye had travelled with her mother to France, intending to study with Tournier at the Paris Conservatoire. When Tournier was found to be away from France, Verlye spent nine months studying with Marcel Grandjany at Fountainebleau. She also was the recipient of

a scholarship to the Curtis Institute and studied for a short time with Carlos Salzedo.

Many elements of Verlye's technique come from experience in professional situations. She is extremely conscious of muffling the strings after playing, because of many years of working with radio microphones which pick up extra string vibrations. In order to muffle the left hand notes, Verlye replaces the fingers directly back onto the strings to muffle the individual sound. While reading music, Verlye seldom marks in pedal changes, and has all the glissandos memorized so she can play them at sight.

Verlye's present work in Los Angeles includes Gospel recordings (often with a chord chart given, over which she improvises), television, motion pictures, and records. In 1981 she will appear in several recitals, one with harpist Toni Robinson, featuring works of Harry Zimmerman, and in duo-harp recitals with Stella Castellucci.

Verlye Mills has written three books: *New Harmony For Harp*, co-authored with Harry Zimmerman, *Rhythm For Harp*, co-authored with Stella Castellucci, and *Harp With A Beat*. Her solo record albums include: *Harp Virtuoso Verlye Mills*, *Harp With A Beat*, *The Two Harps of Verlye Mills*, *The Two Sides of Verlye Mills*, and *Verlye Mills Plays Harp With The Big Band Beat*.

In a review of one of her records, a Los Angeles paper stated, very accurately "Miss Mills is a true artist; her interpretive talents . . . are matched only by her flair for sparkling technique and her dazzling method of presentation."



Verlye Mills with a group during the days in New York.