

THE ROBERT MAXWELL STORY

By June Hunzinger



ROBERT MAXWELL

Two fine strong hands and forty-seven strings are the obvious and the tangible instruments with which Robert Maxwell weaves his magic. It is for us, in whose lives the harp plays a very integral part, to seek to define the intangible, the elusive.

How often we have heard it said that our finest harpists are those who at an early age chose the harp as their very own. When he was only seven, Robert Maxwell's older brothers, Abe and Myor, who were high school students, were awarded scholarships by the New York Philharmonic Society and they chose to study the harp. Sometimes they allowed their little brother to accompany them to their lessons with Mrs. Steffie Ormandy who was the harpist with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. His modest and self-effacing manner was even then in evidence, for it was a whole year before little Bobbie spoke up to say that he knew the lesson too. To Mrs. Ormandy's complete surprise he seated himself behind the great concert harp, rested it on his shoulder and "almost without error," she recalls, "he played through the lessons which had been taught to his

brothers that first year." Mrs. Ormandy at once included him into the scholarship and so an auspicious career was begun.

After the three brothers had studied with her for three years, Mrs. Ormandy reluctantly left them and the New York Philharmonic to join the Minneapolis Symphony. The Educational Committee was able to arrange for Marcel Grandjany to audition the young aspirants and they became his students. The next five years, in the hands of this great artist and teacher, saw much of molding, developing and guiding into musical maturity a young man of phenomenal talents and uncommon sensitivity.

When at seventeen Maxwell became the harpist with the N.B.C. Symphony, it was this experience, he relates, that brought to him the realization of his need for creative expression. "For no matter how beautiful the music might be, it seems to me like a frustrating future to sit back for five hundred and eighty-four bars and then to play just one."

And so he chose the supper club and cafe field, for this was at that time the only way in which he could present the harp as a vital and living part of contemporary music and particularly the music of Tin Pan Alley. The first few years of show business were difficult enough to discourage anyone other than one with the determination of purpose and the vision of Robert Maxwell. No bed of roses may be a cliché, but not in reference to the experiences he encountered as he struggled to gain work in honky-tonks, in cabarets or in fact anywhere that he might be heard. Cafe owners were not only reluctant to hire anything as remote from their understanding of music as a harp but frequently the pay was very small and very uncertain.

A volume could be filled with the stories and the anecdotes of those early days . . . of his efforts to gain the attention of those who talked loudly and clinked glasses as he played, of inebriated patrons who heckled and taunted, of the time he felt he could bear no more and walked off halfway through the act. But he was married and his dark, vivacious bride Vickie, became for him the helper, the travelling companion, the confidant, the one who was there to sustain his courage when the tide ebbed low.

When in 1942 our country was drawn into war, Robert Maxwell volunteered and enlisted in the Coast Guard. After a training period his branch of the service organized an entertainment unit and a band under the leadership of Rudy Vallee and with this group Maxwell toured the South Pacific for more than three years bringing diversions to

the weary battle zones. One day he was scheduled to play a program for more than a thousand men and knowing that this day was the anniversary of Bach, he decided to abandon his popular jazz performance and to play an all Bach program. Perhaps to others this would have seemed a temerarious act but for Maxwell it grew directly out of his belief to which his whole existence had become dedicated: that in every man there dwells a deep need and some degree of sensitivity that is waiting to respond to serious music. The response was for him heart warming. The tired battle worn men did show all of the enthusiasm he had hoped for.

With his return to civilian life Maxwell renewed his efforts to awaken the public to a greater acceptance of the harp as a solo instrument. The seeds he had sown earlier began to bear fruit. He was being rewarded with more engagements and with many more successful appearances. In the years that followed he came before eager and gratified audiences in the finest theaters, supper clubs and hotels throughout our own country and in Canada.

An appearance at the London Palladium deserves to be told separately for it was through this engagement that the inspiration was born for his hit song, *Ebb Tide*. Maxwell tells the story with a wonderment and a detachment as though, now that it is completed it no longer belongs to him. As the ship approached the English coast, he saw great clouds of gulls as they rose and dipped in rhythmic motion and he heard their voices rising above the beat of the ocean waves. In these moments he was filled with new sounds and new impressions and he became eager to shape them into new music. And so while he was still in London and although much of his time was consumed by personal appearances and interviews, besides the Palladium shows, he worked devotedly to complete the most popular of all of his compositions. *Ebb Tide* swept its way to the top of the hit parade and reigned there for a record twenty-one weeks, thereby gaining even greater popularity than *Shangri-La* which Jackie Gleason uses as his theme song.

Although still in his early thirties, it may seem that so many successes could well be the fulfillment of a career which includes acclaim before the finest houses in the world, the recording of many top hit tunes and of writing successful compositions. Yet Maxwell has added another star to his crown. M-G-M records has appointed him as their musical director in addition to his duties as arranger, conductor and of course performer. Yet with his singleness of purpose and conciseness of method he has worked steadily for the past ten years on a study which he describes as a "new scientific approach of American Jazz as applied to the harp." Using his academic training as a schooled serious musician, he has made a comprehensive study and analysis of the keyboard harmony of Tin Pan Alley syncopation and jazz rhythms, and a scientific approach to jazz improvisations. "How fortunate it was," he says, harking back to those early childhood days of his first studies, "how fortunate that the scholarship also included a thorough curriculum of solfeggio, harmony, counterpoint and composition."

To this we can only echo, "How fortunate indeed that the artistry, the musicianship and the dedicated soul of Robert Maxwell was directed to the harp!"

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In the University of Illinois' Concert Band, we amplify the harp with a contact mike, an amplifier and a speaker. The contact mike is fastened firmly in place on the sounding board approximately at the 5th octave C string. It is held in place by the use of masking tape and is insured a close contact by tying a string across the center of the mike (around the body of the harp) and making the string as tight as possible. The degree of amplification is controlled either by the harpist or an assistant.

—from Prof. Mark H. Hindsley
Director of University of Illinois Bands
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William K. Breckenridge, Professor Emeritus of the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, died in Oberlin, Ohio, on May 27, 1956 at the age of 88. Mr. Breckenridge, a pianist and organist, studied the harp in Paris and Philadelphia. The harp department of the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, which he established in 1908 and where he taught until his retirement in 1935, was one of the first to be integrated with a college in the United States.