

# on the lighter side

## Gail Laughton, Jazz Harpist

by Carrol McLaughlin

When Cary Grant played a harp solo in the movie, "The Bishop's Wife," he appeared to have an amazing aptitude for the instrument. But while it was Cary Grant sitting at the harp, the fingers and the music belonged to Gail Laughton, one of the truly gifted figures of the harp world.



Gail Laughton

Laughton started playing harp in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where his father made harps and his mother taught the instrument. A child prodigy, Gail toured Panama and Cuba in the 1920s, playing with his family's orchestra. When he was sixteen, he became harpist with the Oklahoma City Symphony. About the same time, he became interested in jazz music. Laughton developed his own "swing" style by listening to jazz and experimenting with certain "licks" and pedal slides on his harp. Laughton's first experience in live radio broadcasting came in 1939, when he became staff harpist with Eliot Roosevelt's Texas State Network, in Forth Worth, Texas. Laughton had his own weekly half-hour show featuring classical harp music, in addition to playing twenty broadcasts with the Texas State Network Orchestra. When

Laughton was featured as soloist with the orchestra, he would first play his jazz tune for the staff orchestrator, who would write out parts for the orchestra to back Laughton's solo.

In 1941 Laughton moved to the West Coast. The manager of the Lyon & Healy harp salon in Los Angeles heard him play, and was so impressed that he made arrangements for Laughton to meet Harpo Marx.

Laughton has vivid memories of his first meeting with Harpo, Harpo's wife Susan, and their son Bill, who is now a composer and musician in Hollywood. At the time Laughton met Harpo, the Marx Brothers' movie, "The Big Store," was already in production. Laughton coached Harpo on one of Laughton's own jazz arrangements for the harp solo in that film. Laughton and Harpo worked together for several years, collaborating on other films. Through Harpo, Laughton met many Los Angeles producers, including Jack Warner of Warner Brothers.

In California, Laughton's career was particularly supported by Sir Charles and Lady Mendl, and by Barbara Hutton, who was then married to Cary Grant. Many musical evenings were organized in-



Photo inscribed to Laughton from Harpo Marx.



cluding jam sessions with musicians such as Duke Ellington, Spike Jones, and Mickey Rooney. After attending one such session, Cole Porter wrote a piece for Laughton entitled "Jazz Nocturne for Harp." Duke Ellington also wrote an original composition for Laughton, which Ellington often played at the jam sessions but would never write out on paper. Laughton recalls being a "precocious brat," locking Duke Ellington in the bathroom one evening and not allowing him to leave until the piece was written out on manuscript paper slipped under the bathroom door.

In 1942, Laughton enlisted in the Air Force. This took him away from his instrument for a while, but he was eventually transferred to the Air Force's Radio Production Unit of the West Coast. This talented group was comprised of many of the top musicians from the Los Angeles area, including studio musicians and recording stars. The calibre of this group was such that it was estimated that in peacetime it would have cost \$50,000 per hour to hire the orchestra.



Army Sergeant, 1943.

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Laughton has been associated with innumerable radio, television, and movie productions. He was featured on NBC's nationwide broadcast, "Al Pearce and His Gang," and worked often with such people as Dimitri Tiomkin of Independent Producers Corporation, and Max Steiner of Warner Brothers. When Warner Brothers hired Laughton in 1948, they were convinced he could do the work of two other harpists. If a part absolutely demanded two harps, Laughton included his sister, harpist Charlotte Laughton, who now teaches and performs in southern California.

Gail Laughton cut his first record, an all-jazz harp solo album for RCA Victor in 1942. This record, no longer available, included many Ellington tunes, and featured Spike Jones on drums. Two classical recordings of Laughton are presently available. They are Volume 5 of an *Anthology of Paul Hindemith*, with Laughton performing the Hindemith Sonata; and *Harps at the Ancient Temples*, a suite of eleven of his own uniquely beautiful compositions.

Following a special performance of Laughton's in Los Angeles, which included both classical and jazz music, Artur Rubinstein said that Gail Laughton "transcends his instrument." Laughton's contribution to the harp world in performance, composition, and his unique grasp of the harp in the jazz idiom, have made him a respected and cherished member of the harp community.