

In Memorium: Daphne Hellman

1915–2002

by Park Stickney



Daphne Hellman



Daphne Hellman with musical partners Baby Dee and Mr. Spoons outside the Village Gate

The harp world lost one of its most colorful members this August, when Daphne Hellman passed away. She had fallen a few weeks before, breaking her hip and elbow, and died while in a rehabilitation center. Daphne was constantly on the move until the end of her life, whether playing in Hong Kong for the Fringe Festival, on the streets of Paris for the Fête de la Musique, in India, Sri Lanka or at the Firebird Café in New York City. For New Yorkers, she was probably best known for her performances in the subway system, as a longtime part of its “Music under the Streets” program, playing often at Lexington Ave station on the N/R line, as well as at Grand Central Station (“the Carnegie Hall of the subway,” as she called it). Daphne was one of the earliest jazz harpists, an innovator who played with an intense joy, no matter what kind of music she was playing, who succeeded in finding a unique musical voice, and whose music, enthusiasm, and *joie de vivre*, touched countless people.

Daphne, born Daphne Van Beuren Bayne in NYC in 1915, came from a world of wealth, of governesses and private schools. She started the harp at age twelve, with Mildred Dilling, then went to France to study with Henriette Renié. At sixteen, she stopped to pursue acting and modeling, training at the American

Academy of Dramatic Arts and the Royal Academy in London, and appearing on Broadway in a production of *Hamlet*. She modeled for Man Ray and was on the cover of *Harper's Bazaar*.

In 1936, Daphne married Harry Bull, editor of *Town & Country*. She would marry twice more, first to Geoffrey Hellman, a writer for the *New Yorker*, in 1941, and then to Hsio-Wen Shih, an architect and writer who mysteriously disappeared in 1965. She gave birth to two children: the late Sandy Bull, a well-known guitarist, and Daisy Paradis, who performs and teaches sitar and studied with Ali Akbar Khan. She also adopted a third child, Digger St. John.

Daphne returned to the harp after hearing Nicanor Zabaleta by chance in Haiti. Upon returning to New York, she studied with several harp teachers, including Carlos Salzedo, Mario de Stefano and Marcel Grandjany. She performed at Town Hall with the singer/actress Marianne Oswald, who sang in the cabarets of Berlin in 1918 and was later an enormous artistic presence in Paris after the 2nd World War, a colleague of Camus, Cocteau and Jacques Prévert. In a review of this concert, *Time* magazine described Daphne as being “as curvesome as a treble clef.”

She was on the roster of the Community Concerts

Association and gave classical concerts in schools and universities. However, it's as a jazz harpist that Daphne was best known—especially as a jazz harpist who played in unusual places! She studied jazz with Lovilla Tullos of the Cab Callaway band and with pianist Phyllis Pinkerton (who played with Charles Mingus among others and was a student of Lennie Tristano.) She played in legendary rooms with groups that conjure another era: with Ving Merlin and his All-Girl Band at the Hotel New Yorker, at Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe, and after meeting impresario Julius Monk, at Upstairs at the Downstairs, the Ruban Bleu, Versailles, Le Perroquet, and others.

In the 50's, she started her trio "Hellman's Angels", with acoustic bass and guitar. The group was named by Daphne's longtime friend Norman Mailer when he said "They're Angels, man, Angels!" With this trio, Daphne played at the now-defunct Village Gate jazz club every Tuesday, for thirty years. These performances were one of the constants of NY musical life—like the *Fantasticks*, whose theatre was just around the corner from the Gate, and which, like Daphne, also finished its run this year. Coincidentally, Daphne rented the show its first harp. In 1976, she was a judge at the first Salvi Jazz and Pop Harp Festival in Santa Barbara, which is where first I met her. She was a regular presence at these festivals as a player and later as a teacher.

Daphne recorded four LP's: *Holiday for Harp*, *Pop Goes the Angels*, *Hellman's Angels Play Country*, and *Hellman's Baroque Angels*. In 1996, she released a compilation CD of these recordings entitled *Hellman's Angels Gala*. Her repertoire was wide-ranging, from Scarlatti sonatas, Bach, and Debussy, to country western (*Last Date*, *King of the Road*), to the Beatles, Gershwin, jazz standards and Scott Joplin rags. Her arrangements were bold, humorous, and technically challenging. Playing with her was like riding a bronco. She would just name a tune and charge ahead, ready or not.

An important fact of Daphne's musical life were the annual tours she made to Asia. Starting in 1980, she played at the Fringe Club in Hong Kong each January during the Fringe Festival, then would continue on to Sri Lanka and India to play in hotels and give concerts, everything arranged through her vast network of friends. She usually took other musicians along: her trio, or Mr. Spoons, a virtuoso spoons player, Phoebe Legere, Sean Grissom, Cajun cellist, or Richard Johnson, saxophonist, to name just a few.

I was privileged to play with her on four of these expeditions, and it was while traveling with Daphne that I saw firsthand what a great traveler she

was—and how unusual events seemed to follow her. She could leave for six weeks with a suitcase that was nearly empty, and a Salvi Daphne harp (of course) in a beat-up wooden case, and be elegant no matter what the occasion, with a style completely her own.

The first time I went with her, she was hit by a cab just before we left Hong Kong. We ended up staying much longer than expected, as she nursed broken knees, ribs, and feet, then came back to NY and just kept on going as if nothing had happened. The next year, there was a terrorist bombing in Sri Lanka the day after we arrived, which destroyed the room where we were supposed to play. On that same trip, we met a very interesting Swiss woman in Madras who joined us, the following year, in Hong Kong. The last trip ended up in Geneva, with Daphne as my witness as Christine (the Madras woman) and I were married.

Daphne's house on East 61st street was a rush-hour train station of lodgers, visitors, dinner guests, animals, and harps. Daphne lived in many worlds simultaneously—the harp world, jazz world, literary circles, high-society, animal lovers, artists. Every January, she gave a legendary party at the Village Gate, where it seemed like all the worlds turned out in force. Part of what made her life so magical was this confluence of people, centered around her, brought together, impossibly, by her, with the result that she seemed to know everyone and everyone seemed to know her. I'll never forget playing with her for a birthday party for caricaturist Al Hirshfeld (who drew Daphne twice), when Kurt Vonnegut walked up and said, "Whenever I hear a harp, I look for you, Daphne." Daphne was Mary Poppins and Auntie Mame rolled into one.

Daphne, in the years that I knew her best, the last 10 years, in which I was one of the lodgers in her townhouse, stuck to a schedule which was per-



Park Stickney, Daphne Hellman and Keith Peters, February 1998, Madras, India

haps one of the secrets of her vitality, and which was based on an underlying rule: she did exactly what she wanted to do. Every night she would have a scotch and coke and a cigarette before dinner. There would almost always be a guest or two, and then she would go out, to a party, a show, or a concert. Her cooking was famously...challenging, but her hospitality made up for the culinary adventures her guests faced. During the day, she would read (the *NY Times*, the *Daily News*, books by the sackful), practice, write letters (she was a champion letter writer), and, in the afternoon, play at the Favia Café (or in earlier times, at Kitty O'Shea's, or for breakfast at the Hotel Wales).

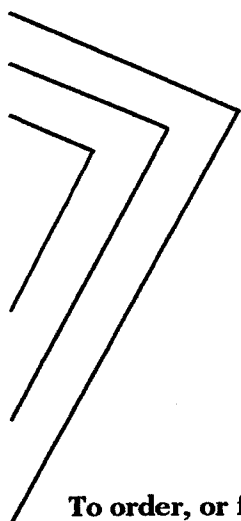
The Wales is worth mentioning because of a moment that was uniquely Daphne. A new manager at the hotel had decided that Daphne, in her eighties, with her spiky punk hairdo and bohemian clothes, wasn't the right look for the hotel, and fired her. Daphne took the news in stride, and started going out much later at night, as she didn't have to be at the hotel at eight AM anymore. Then, one night, around midnight, Daphne came back from a concert, and, with a mischievous look in her eyes, told me "Maybe I'll buy that hotel..." The

amazing thing is that she was serious, and actually looked into it, but learned that the Wales was part of a chain, which, although for sale, couldn't be broken up.

Her migrations to Asia every January, to Paris every June for the Fête de la Musique, to her house in Long Island every weekend, were also part of her schedule. Doing exactly what she wanted, even if it meant doing it alone, driving herself in her enormous huge Suburban, or walking in the rain to the subway, was Daphne at her most powerful, something she owed only to the strength of her personality.

Daphne loved to laugh, to sing, to dance. She was, in Eleanor Fell's words, "a splash of red paint on the harp world." The life that she created was wholly her own, an original work of art. She was active up until the day she had her accident: the month before, she played in Paris, as usual; Hellman's Angels had just performed at the Metropolitan Museum; and the day before she fell, we gave a duo concert at Skidmore College. Daphne Hellman, who seemed like she would go on forever, will be missed by all who knew her, for she really knew how to live. As she once said to Sam Milligan, "I may not be the greatest harpist in town, but by God, no one has more fun than I do!" ☺☺

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