The Marsalas: A Love Story

By Lynn René Bayley

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Back in the early 1970s, I occasionally dropped into a junk shop in Passaic, New Jersey that had, among other things, large piles—and yes, they were just heaped into piles, not placed on shelves or anything else—of old LPs and 45s. Most came from the period 1952–1964, many were out of their original covers, and more than a few were scratched, chipped at the edges, or even cracked. But they were cheap (LPs for a quarter, 45s for a dime), and amidst all the garbage were some real rarities. One such that I picked up was an old ten-inch Brunswick LP featuring reissues of Vocalion-Decca-Brunswick jazz 78s from the late 1930s to the early 1940s. One side was by Bud Freeman and his Summa Cum Laude Orchestra; the other side was by someone named Joe Marsala, with harpist Adele Girard on some of the tracks.

Of course I knew who Bud Freeman was; his name was legendary—he had been a charter member of the Austin High Gang in the late 1920s and was still playing here and there. Joe Marsala was a name new to me. I listened to the recordings, which were updated versions of old jazz pieces from the 1920s. They sounded pretty nice, but they didn't grab me at the time.

Talking to older jazz musicians and critics, I learned that I was by no means alone in my assessment. I was told that Marsala was a "pretty good" clarinetist who played at the Hickory House in New York City for a decade, and that Girard played "very pretty" on the harp but couldn't swing. The Marsalas were considered marginal figures, consistently left out of jazz histories (such as Gunther Schuller's *The Swing Era*).[1]

Yet with time, a greater knowledge of jazz history, and a deeper appreciation of what certain older jazz musicians could and couldn't do, I came to appreciate Marsala quite a bit and his wife, harpist Adele Girard, even more. Joe Marsala was a technically superb clarinetist who had a brighter top range than that of Artie Shaw and a deeper, richer low range than that of Benny Goodman. A product of the Chicago jazz scene in the 1920s, he gravitated to the playing of both Johnny Dodds and Jimmie Noone and fused elements of both of their styles into his own. His improvisations were adventurous when compared to those of such late-twenties New Orleans players like Barney Bigard or Omer Simeon, he swung hard, and he could (and did) play both traditional jazz (or Dixieland, if you prefer) and the contemporary jazz styles of his time. His only sin was that he was, to coin a phrase, conventionally excellent but not a groundbreaker, and for this reason he has been pushed to the side in jazz histories.

Adele Girard, however, is another story. Her only real predecessor in the realm of jazz harp was Casper Reardon, who died young in 1941. But since Reardon was a man and recorded with Jack Teagarden, he is sometimes considered to have been a better jazz harpist than Girard. That simply is not so. Although a fine technician, Reardon's improvisations were fairly tame and didn't really swing. Within the limitations of her instrument, Girard *did* swing, and her improvisations are much better than his. It is a testament to her excellence that almost no one other than LaVilla Tulos, an African American jazz harpist, could equal her in swinging (though Tulos' improvisations were not as adventurous). The reason is, as Girard explained so well, the harp is probably the most difficult instrument to "swing" on because it is so technically complicated.[2] There are seven pedals, each controlling a small group of strings; therefore, one's hand and foot coordination is considerably more complex than on a piano. It's like the difference between playing jazz on an actual full-sized, fill-up-the-building pipe organ or a portable electric organ. Even the most sophisticated of the latter, like the Hammond B-3, are relatively easy to control compared to the former, which is why Fats Waller's 1926–27 jazz recordings on the pipe organ still hold up as marvels.

In some ways, Girard's improvisations were similar to those of her husband, but at times she differed from him. This, I have since discovered, was because she was trained in jazz improvisation by three of the best White musicians of her day: Frank Trumbauer and Charlie and Jack Teagarden.[3] But more on that in a bit.

1 Gunther Schuller, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz*, (Oxford, OUP, 1989).

2 Phillip D. Atteberry "The Sweethearts of Swing," *Mississippi Rag* 21 (May 1994): 4, https://www.pitt.edu/~atteberr/jazz/articles/Girard.html.

3 Atteberry, "The Sweethearts of Swing," 2.

Studio photo of Adele Girard and Joe Marsala, 1938, (*James Kriegsmann, photo*).

First, we need to trace the history of the leader, the man she married, from his early days to his years on 52nd Street, the heart of New York City's jazz scene. This isn't terribly easy to do; Joe was a modest man who didn't talk a lot about his past, even to his wife—thus all we have are the tidbits of information which she passed along.

Marsala was born in Chicago on January 4, 1907, which would have put him on the city's jazz scene during its heyday in the mid-1920s. His immigrant parents originally settled in New Orleans, which made Joe's connection with jazz all the more likely, and his father Pietro played valve trombone on the riverboats. But Pietro, who was also known as Pete, married and had five children, which forced him to get a job as a stock clerk to supplement his part-time trombone playing.[4]

Joe had to toughen up quickly as a youth in order to survive Al Capone's gangster-run city. According to Adele, at about age twelve Joe's mother sent him to the local grocer to buy some food, and with the little money left over he bought a peanut butter sandwich and began eating it as he left the store. Suddenly, "a black limousine wheeled around the corner, the doors flew open, and machine gun bullets riddled a man standing next to him. Joe dropped everything and ran, but before going half a block, an old man on his porch said, 'Walk, son, walk. Don't call attention to yourself.' And Joe did. He never ate peanut butter again nor could [he] tolerate the smell of it."[5]

Marsala quit school at age fifteen and naïvely took a job that paid pretty well to help his family out: running liquor for a bootlegger. According to his daughter, Eleisa Marsala Trampler, Joe's father "hauled him off the premises," letting him know that he could get killed that way, "so Joe shoveled cinders off freight cars [and] tried factory and office work." He couldn't keep up physically enough to handle those jobs. While working for a trucking company he was thrown through the windshield in an accident, which permanently scarred his face and neck. If you look closely at photos of Marsala, you will notice that he wore makeup to cover the scars as best he could.[6]

Attracted to jazz and having tried out several instruments, Joe and his younger brother Marty eventually settled on the clarinet and trumpet, respectively. Again, according to Trampler, "When Joe could afford a clarinet, [an] African American neighbor gave him tips on playing the blues. Marsala was greatly inspired by Jimmie Noone [who played with a little band at the Apex Club], but it was after hearing Louis Armstrong and the Hot Five in the 1920s that he decided to be a musician."[7] Unable to afford lessons, he was noticed by Clarence Warmelin, the former clarinetist for the Minneapolis Symphony. Warmelin knew that Marsala couldn't afford lessons, but told him that if he came to his studio he'd leave the door open so Marsala could listen to the instructions he gave to his paying pupil. "After my student leaves," he told him, "I'll go out for a sandwich, that way I won't have to charge you." Marsala thus picked up the all-important basics of clarinet playing this way, though Trampler insists that "he was mainly self-taught."[8]

For a time, Marsala played with fellow Chicagoan Francis "Muggsy" Spanier, six years his senior. Spanier, already established as a professional musician at the time, loved Marsala's playing, and both of them were of the same mind about updating the old jazz standards for the modern audiences of the 1930s. This paid off more for Spanier than for Marsala. Muggsy's Ragtime Band of 1939–40 recorded sixteen sides for RCA Bluebird that were warmly praised by jazz critics of the time and have come to be known as "The Great 16," credited with

4 Eleisa Marsala Trampler, "Don't Let It End, Part I: Joe Marsala," *Clarinet* 34, no. 3, (June 2007): 65.

5 Atteberry "The Sweethearts of Swing," 4.

6 Eleisa Marsala Trampler, "Don't Let It End, Part I," 65.

7 Trampler, "Don't Let It End, Part I," 65.

8 Trampler, "Don't Let It End, Part I," 65–66.

Portrait of Joe Marsala and Adele Girard, Hickory House, between 1946 and 1948. (*William P. Gottlieb, photo*), Library of Congress https://www.loc.gov/item/gottlieb.06041/.

sparking the Dixieland revival of the 1940s,[9] while Marsala's late-1930s updates of such tunes as *Clarinet Marmalade, Walkin' the Dog,* and *Wolverine Blues* are generally ignored or dismissed. Much of this has to do with promotion and location. Although Spanier was convinced that his band never got the gigs or promotion that it needed and deserved, the promotion he did get was blockbuster compared to Marsala.

In 1935, Marsala joined the band of New Orleans trumpeter Joe "Wingy" Manone (sometimes, even on record labels, erroneously spelled "Mannone") at Adrian Rollini's Tap Room in New York. Although Joe could read music and Wingy couldn't, they got along famously, with Wingy helping to loosen up the somewhat shy youngster. And each time Wingy got a better gig, he took Joe along with him, moving first from the Tap Room to the Famous Door and then to the Hickory House at 144 West 52nd Street. Being older and better known, Manone was able to wangle a good recording contract with RCA Victor, first on their full-priced black label records in 1935 and then, the following year, on their less expensive Bluebird label, and of course Marsala was a part of his band—as were Adrian Rollini, the Tap Room's owner and a formidable bass saxist, and Putney Dandridge, a Black vaudeville singer who at the time was trying to make it in New York. In between his Victor black label and Bluebird contracts, Manone recorded for Vocalion, once a "name" company in the 1920s but then a budget label on a par with Bluebird discs.

9 See, for example, the assessment in "Spanier Band Advances on the Big Town," *Down Beat*, 6 no. 12 (1 November 1939): 1.

Portrait of Johnny Hodges, Rex William Stewart, Adele Girard, Harry Carney, Barney Bigard, and Joe Marsala, Turkish Embassy, Washington, D.C., 193-. (*William P. Gottlieb, photo*), Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/gottlieb.02671/.

Somewhere in the middle of this, Marsala managed to wangle a deal with Decca to record six sides, two of them under the name of "The Six Blue Chips," featuring a then little-known trumpeter named Roy Eldridge. Ironically, however, these were Dixieland-styled records, the only time Eldridge was known to play in that style. On one of his General recording sessions, he used African American trumpeter/vocalist Bill Coleman and alto saxophonist Pete Brown, one of the forerunners of rhythm and blues.

Unlike Marsala, Adele Girard came from a French Canadian family in Holyoke, Massachusetts which was originally well-off: her grandfather was one of the original contractors of Williams College, her father a violinist, and her mother had a fine soprano voice. But you can see how their "blue blood" interfered with their business decisions when you read that her mother won both a scholarship to study voice at Williams and an opportunity to study and sing at the La Scala Opera in Milan but turned both down because she believed that singing on stage was "unladylike."[10]

Fortunately for us, the Girards fell on hard times during the Depression and daughter Adele was much more realistic about making it in the world. Originally a pianist (though she began taking harp lessons at age fourteen), Adele began by playing some jobs in the Catskills her brother Don found for her. Her mother was set against it, but when Adele packed her bags and showed she was serious, her mother came with her to protect Adele's good name. After landing a job as pianist and vocalist with the fairly well-known society bandleader Harry Sosnick in 1933, Adele eventually switched from

10 Atteberry, "The Sweethearts of Swing," 1.

Still from "Millenium Jump" (Soundies Featurette #1253), August 26, 1946,

piano to harp the following year, and it was on this job that she honed her skills on the instrument. In the winter of 1935, she joined the band of another fairly well known leader, saxophonist Dick Stabile, this time strictly as singer-harpist. Her skills rapidly improved.[11]

In early 1936, Stabile decided to go on the road and couldn't afford to take a harp with him, so Adele lost her job. Feeling dejected, she was approached, in her own words, by "a formal looking, goateed gentleman" who walked up to her and offered her a job playing in his small band. This "gentleman" was the famous C-melody saxist Frank Trumbauer; his bandmates, in a group they called The Three T's, were Charlie and Jack Teagarden. According to Girard, "Their harpist, Casper Reardon, had taken a job in the Broadway production of *I Married an Angel*," and this was "the first musically challenging job I ever had" because she knew very little about jazz despite playing dance music for several years.[12] "But the Teagardens and Frankie Trumbauer were fine musicians and treated me well. From them I learned the jazz repertoire. But even more importantly, I learned how to improvise. My having been forced to play without music so much had given me a knack for knowing which notes to play, but I had no sense of the feel, phrasing, and logic that go into jazz improvisation. I learned those from listening to the Teagardens and Frankie every night."[13]

Girard thought she had finally made it, playing with these top professionals in their field, but after playing in several of the best New York nightclubs, most often at the Hickory House, she was told that "Paul Whiteman had hired Jack, Charlie, and Frankie. My situation was desperate this time because I had just purchased a $2,500 gold Lyon and Healy harp. So I went to Jack Goldman, owner of the Hickory House, to see if he could help me. He told me that a young clarinetist, Joe Marsala, was putting a group together to replace us."[14]

Although this scenario sounds logical, there's a bit of a problem with the chronology, because the Teagarden brothers both signed five-year contracts to play in Whiteman's band in 1933, not 1936, and Trumbauer himself played in the Whiteman orchestra during 1935–36. I did, however, recently find the answer in a YouTube posting of an interview with Trumbauer from 1952.[15] Business was slow for Whiteman in 1936 after his band lost popularity to the new hot swing bands, so Whiteman decided to take a vacation for a few months without being specific about how long it would be. The musicians were called back to the fold at the end of December 1936. There are no commercial recordings by The Three T's except for one, "I'se A-Muggin,'" made on March 10, 1936 for Victor, but this group included Bud Freeman on tenor sax, a Whiteman clarinetist named John Cordaro, and pianist Roy Bargy in place of a harp. However, in recent years an album of airchecks has surfaced on the Jazz Oracle label featuring both Adele and the aforementioned Casper Reardon.[16]

As it turned out, Jack Goldman was well acquainted with Joe Marsala due to his prior affiliation with Manone. One of the reasons why Marsala was chosen to be the new band's leader was that he suffered from colitis and therefore had no tolerance for alcohol. This meant that it was guaranteed that he, at least, would be sober by the night's end![17]

Of course Marsala hired the pretty young harpist and was delighted when he learned that she not only knew a lot of jazz standards but could also improvise. It was musical love at first sight for both of them, and within a few months of their opening at the Hickory House on St. Patrick's Day, 1937, they eloped and married at the Actors' Chapel (St. Malachy's) on 49th Street in July.[18] Joe had wanted a full wedding with all the trimmings, but Adele knew her mother well enough to know that she'd never even allow such a union, let alone attend the ceremony.

11 Atteberry, "The Sweethearts of Swing," 2.

12 Although Girard remembered Reardon's Broadway engagement as the cause of his departure from the Three T's, this chronology is suspect because *I Married an Angel* did not open until May of 1938.

13 Atteberry, "The Sweethearts of Swing," 2.

14 Atteberry, "The Sweethearts of Swing," 2.

15 "Hal Barton Interviews Frankie Trumbauer," Radio Station WTAD, Quincy, Illinois, October, 1952, YouTube video, 30:11, posted by Jazzguy1927, November 15, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2RfZJSkPxNw&t=691s. In this interview Trumbauer recalls Reardon leaving the Three T's due to a return engagement with the Cincinnati Symphony, his former employer.

16 Jack Teagarden (trombone); Frank Trumbauer (sax); Charlie Teagarden (trumpet); Casper Reardon (harp); Adele Girard (harp), *The Three T's: "Live" From The Hickory House*, New York, December 1936, Jazz Oracle (BDW 8056), 2007, compact disc.

17 Atteberry, "The Sweethearts of Swing," 3.

18 Atteberry, "The Sweethearts of Swing," 3.

As it turned out, Adele was right. When she broke the news to her mother a few months later, her mother's comment was, "Adele, he's a damned Italian who will murder us in our beds!" Mama Girard had seen one too many movies and was convinced that every Italian from Chicago was a gangster.[19]

Marsala was anything but. Polite, soft-spoken, modest about his talents, he did everything he could to make the band a success, hiring the top jazz musicians in New York as they became available. At one point, his lead trumpet player was the great Henry "Red" Allen, Jr. When his band was booked to play a different venue in New York, he was told that "the black gentleman" would have to leave. "Under the circumstances," said Joe, "the band would not be able to play." It was only when the manager saw them actually packing up their instruments that he allowed Allen to stay.[20]

Thus we have the beginnings of an anomaly. Marsala, as I mentioned earlier, stayed at the Hickory House for eleven years, so he had to be doing something right, and even a cursory glance at the musicians on his many recordings will show that he did indeed have top talent in his band: besides his brother Marty, Joe's trumpeters included Bill Coleman, Benny Carter, Max Kaminsky, and Bobby Hackett (and later, one session with Dizzy Gillespie) and his drummers included George Wettling, Buddy Rich, Shelly Manne, Dave Tough, and Zutty Singleton. Like Benny Goodman, Marsala was a pioneer in the integration of live jazz, but Benny got all the credit while Marsala did even more. But in a way, this revolving door of stars made the Marsala band look like a temporary haven for these musicians to hang out and play good jazz until something better came along, for none of them stayed very long.

And there was another problem. Marsala insisted on always playing quality music, whether swing or streamlined New Orleans style, and he never condescended to record any pop tunes of the day—thus he never had any hit records. Without hit records, no one but hardcore jazz collectors—who even then only represented a small percentage of the population—were going to buy his records, and none of them would be played on the radio (except by real jazz DJs like Ralph Berton).[21] Marsala's band recorded for Vocalion and, for two or three years, for Decca, but most of the time they had to make do with small indie labels like General Records, known almost exclusively for having

Toots Thielemans with Adele and Joe on 52nd Street c. 1948, (*William P. Gottlieb, photo*), Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/gottlieb.11251/.

made Jelly Roll Morton's last recordings. Most people who are not Joe Marsala fans don't even know that he *did* record for General. Later on, he recorded on the Black & White and Musicraft labels, neither one with good distribution. When his Decca recording of *Twelve Bar Stampede/Feather Bed Lament* was issued in England, his name didn't even appear on the label. Instead, the session was credited to British-born jazz critic Leonard Feather because he had written those tunes. Add to that the fact that the Marsala band never toured but only played in New York and mostly at the Hickory House, and you have a recipe for a modest, solid income but nothing approaching stardom. At one point, from 1939 to 1941, Marsala expanded his group to nine pieces, scored like a big band to take advantage of the swing jazz orchestra craze of the time. But nine pieces—in which there was only one trumpet (his brother Marty) and no trombones—weren't going to bowl anyone over, especially (again) with not a single hit record to their credit. Ironically, Marsala received what was possibly his widest exposure as an occasional guest on Eddie Condon's traditional jazz radio broadcasts beginning in 1943, first from Town Hall and then, from 1945 onward, from Eddie's own nightclub, Condon's.

Though Marsala was known as a traditionalist, his musical curiosity extended briefly into the bebop era. In 1945 he recorded two sessions with the very advanced bop guitarist Chuck Wayne, and in the first of these he had Dizzy Gillespie as a guest artist. Yet again, the records only appealed to the jazz cognoscenti.

By 1949, Marsala had had enough. In an ironic twist of fate, one of his last recordings was a middle-of-the-road pop version of "Someone to Watch Over Me," complete with a chorus of singers. Although it didn't make the top

19 Atteberry, "The Sweethearts of Swing," 3.

20 Atteberry, "The Sweethearts of Swing," 4.

21 Ralph Berton was an educator and writer on jazz who developed and hosted the WNYC radio program *Jazz University of the Air*. For more information, see "Ralph Berton is Dead; Jazz Teacher was 82," *New York Times,* November 24, 1993, 18, https://www.nytimes.com/1993/11/24/obituaries/ralph-berton-is-dead-jazz-teacher-was-82.html.

ten, it was the best-selling record of his career. That's when he knew it was time to leave. Also, in addition to his colitis, Joe had developed an allergy to nickel and had a constant rash on his hands from the nickel-plated keys on his instrument, so he decided to stop playing.[22] Instead, he began writing music, including—of all things—popular songs, some of which were recorded by Frank Sinatra and Patti Page. The lifelong, hardcore jazz man became mainstream at last.

Joe Marsala died at age seventy-one in 1978. Adele outlived him by fifteen years, dying in 1993 at the age of eighty. She missed him terribly, but managed to leave us one last memento of her talent. Clarinetist Bobby Gordon, who had studied with Joe, made an album of standards with her in 1991. Although her playing is less energetic than it had been in her prime, Adele played very well on it. It was her way of saying both "Thank you" and "Goodbye" to the man she loved.[23] ■

22 Trampler, "Don't Let It End, Part I," 68.

23 For more on this tribute recording, see Eleisa Marsala Trampler, "Don't Let It End, Part II: Bobby Gordon," *Clarinet* Vol. 34 Issue 4, (September 2007): 58–60.

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Lynn René Bayley was born in Pennsylvania in 1951 but grew up in northern New Jersey, where she graduated from Seton Hall University in 1972 in the top quarter of her class. A lifelong student of music with a particular interest in classical music and jazz, she wrote reviews and articles periodically for various publications, both regional and national, from 1973 until 2014. In 2016 she decided to start her blog, *The Art Music Lounge*, as an outlet for the specific artists and composers she feels the most empathy for. She moved from New Jersey to Cincinnati, Ohio in 1977.