

# on the lighter side

## The Jazz Harp of Adele Girard

by Carrol McLaughlin

Few harpists can claim to have sat in on jam sessions with greats like Frank Sinatra and Duke Ellington, had followers like Henry Fonda, John Wayne, and “Jimmy” Stewart, and even performed a tap dance routine with Woody Herman. Adele Girard has worked with the best in the world of jazz. She is completely at home in the world of swing, improvisation and “taking choruses.”

To speak with Adele is to hear remembrances of how Fats Waller continually blew cigar smoke in her face when they performed in night clubs together—or how Joe Bushkin, the famous jazz pianist, used to yell to Adele to “stifle the harp” after playing chords. Because of the influence of these great musicians, Adele has developed her own unique style of jazz harp.

Though jazz has become her special love, Adele came from a New England family which was greatly involved in the world of classical music. Adele’s mother was an opera singer and concert pianist, and her father was a violinist and conductor. When Adele was 15, her father took her to meet Alice Mikus, the harpist in his orchestra, the WBZ Springfield (MA) Broadcasting Symphony. Adele up to that time more interested in sports than music, was fascinated by the harp and began lessons with Miss Mikus. She combined both loves of her life by cross-country skiing to the Mikus residence each day to practice.

Adele learned to read music by sneaking into her father’s study and sight-reading his many vaudeville and silent movie cues and themes. She remembers that her father was always upset that his music had been touched, no matter how carefully Adele returned it. After four months of practice, Adele had mastered two pieces on the harp



Adele Girard and Joe Marsala. This photo was used on a recording they made together: Joe Marsala and His Orchestra, Featuring Adele Girard.



Performing in Tullio’s Restaurant, Palm Desert, CA

and won her first job, earning \$75.00 playing those two pieces for a P.T.A. meeting. It was also the first time Adele had experienced a broken string—it happened just before she started to play.

In 1934, Adele graduated from high school and took a job in Chicago as a singer with Harry Soznick’s big band. Upon hearing that Adele played the harp, Harry rented a harp from Lyon & Healy and Adele sat in with the orchestra.

While in Chicago, Adele also performed as harpist for CBS radio. She was a member of a three-piece ensemble which often did “standby” work: if anything happened to the program being transmitted, the musicians would immediately start playing to fill in time until the problem was corrected. Adele remembers this as being very boring work. One day Billy Mills, the conductor of the radio station, arrived in the studio unexpectedly and found Adele and her two string players standing on their heads. Adele recalls that Mr. Mills did not find the situation quite as humorous as the musicians did.

After one year with CBS, Adele moved to New York City and performed with the Dick Stabile band at the Lincoln Hotel. Another New York group with which Adele performed was “The Three T’s,” composed of Jack Teagarden (trombone), Charlie Teagarden (trumpet), and Frank Trombauer (alto saxophone). Adele remembers these musicians as “the best jazz players in the business.” Jazz harpist Caspar Reardon had been performing with the Three T’s before Adele joined the group, but had moved on to play in *I Married an Angel* on Broadway.

When the Three T’s went on the road, Adele remained in New York and joined the band of clarinetist Joe Marsala. They performed at a famed jazz club, the Hickory House on 52nd Street, New York, for 10 years. In 1937 Adele and Joe Marsala were married. Joe’s band was famous in New York, and many great musicians played with them. Some working in town, such as Dizzy Gillespie (who was playing across the street), used to sit in with the band regularly.

Joe Marsala was the first bandleader to integrate a black musician into a white band by including Henry “Red” Allen on trumpet. Adele recalls an engagement at the Wal-



*Performing with Tommy Dorsey. Frank Sinatra was also engaged with the orchestra in the picture.*

dorf-Astoria in New York: as the band was setting up, the hotel management said the black trumpet player could not perform in their hotel. Joe's answer was, "If he can't play, none of us will play," and instructed the band to pack up. The management, faced with no band for the night, reconsidered, and *all* of Joe's band played the job.

Adele was also the star of her own television show for NBC, entitled *Easy Does It*. Adele "did everything" on the program, from roller skating to singing and playing the harp. Adele enjoyed the challenge as she had always loved the stage. However, the schedule was grueling, with rehearsals each morning and five shows per week, aired

live at 6:30 p.m. After her show Adele would go to sit in with Joe Marsala, who had his own television show with CBS.

The wonderful jazz music of Adele Girard has been heard in many cities in the U.S. During the war she performed U.S.O. tours with outstanding entertainers such as Martha Raye. She has performed as soloist at Caesar's Palace, Las Vegas; the Polynesia in Seattle; and the Warehouse Restaurant in Los Angeles, to name a few. Adele is at present living in Palm Desert, California, and plays regularly at Tullio's Restaurant, where she has performed as jazz soloist for the past two years.

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