

on the lighter side

Harvi Griffin

by Carrol McLaughlin

When Harvi Griffin was growing up in Detroit, he had a longstanding “friendly competition” with a girl from his family church. Harvi had played the piano since he was four and a half, and when his friend, Barbera Ivory, was accepted to Cass Technical High School to study harp, Harvi decided that studying harp was what he wanted as well.

However, it was not as easy an endeavor as one might think. In 1955, the harp department at Cass Tech, under the direction of Velma Froude, consisted of 34 students, all women. In the 50 years that harp had been taught at the school, a man had never been accepted into the program. Harvi fought for two years to be allowed to study harp, and finally was able to begin lessons in his senior year. Working with Velma Froude Harvi remembers as a “wonderful experience,” and says it was at this time that he “found his niche in life.”

When Harvi graduated from high school, he enrolled for a Bachelor’s Degree at Michigan State University, continuing with Velma Froude. He still recalls some difficult moments from that period. After one year at Michigan State, Harvi had become frustrated with his studies and had shipped his rented harp back to Chicago. Three weeks later, Ms. Froude asked Harvi if he missed the harp. When he replied, “yes”, she informed him that she had intercepted the harp at the train station, paid the rental charges on it, and that he should go to the station and pick it up!

At the University, Harvi had difficulty convincing the faculty that a black male harpist could be successful as a soloist. He won his argument and remained in harp performance instead of the recommended music education degree program. Harvi also studied speech and drama, which he feels was extremely worthwhile, since “drama is 90% of playing music.”

After graduating from Michigan State University, Harvi attended Mannes College of Music for one and a half years (studying with Lucile Lawrence) and spent one summer at Eastman working with Eileen Malone.

Harvi’s study of popular and jazz music had begun early in his harp education. He recalls that Velma Froude said, “You are a musical snob—music is music! When you leave me I will have you equipped to do it all!” Ms. Froude had gained her experience in the popular and jazz fields while performing with a nine-member women’s ensemble in the 1930s. Among the nine women, the members played 45 different instruments and performed all types of music; Ms. Froude played harp and wrote arrangements.

Harvi began playing pop and jazz professionally while he was at the University. He performed at the White House as the featured soloist with the U.S. Army



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Band, and was a guest performer for the Grand Duchess Charlotte of Luxembourg during her state visit to the United States. Harvi gave the opening performance at the Century Park Sheraton Hotel in Manila, where he worked for eleven months, and in Detroit performed for 23 months at the Hotel Ponchartraine, as well as giving appearances at Caesar’s Palace in Las Vegas.

Each year Harvi tours for eleven months, performing approximately 100 concerts yearly, many given in universities and colleges. In January and February of 1986, he gave 34 concerts in seven and a half weeks, and in the space of five months drove 28,000 miles, transporting his harp in the back of his van. He has made a number of records, including *Harvi plus 3*, with bass, drums, and guitar; *The Harp and Voice of Harvi Griffin*; *The Two Sides of Harvi Griffin*, a two-record collection of classical and pop/jazz selections; *Phase 3*; and *The Other Side*, recorded in 1986.

Among the many fans of Harvi Griffin is the teacher Harvi refers to as an “inspiration and catalyst,” Velma Froude. In her words, “I am very proud of Harvi and his outstanding arrangements for the harp. I told him a long time ago that he had so much to offer, not only to himself, but to so many who would listen to him. He is quite remarkable—but he works hard, too!”