

Gene Bianco and the Soft Push

by Samuel Milligan

It is a little known fact that the great majority of harpists who immigrated to this country from Italy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were from the area around Naples, where the production of harpists, violinists and flutists practically amounted to a local industry. Among the harpists was Filippo Capobianco, who was born in Corleto in 1855. He studied harp with Antonio Sarcona and Juliano DeTrano and toured Italy, Greece, Turkey, France and England as an ensemble player with—logically enough—two violins and flute. Figuring that there was more money to be made in the New World, he traveled with his group next to Venezuela and the United States. After five years, they returned to Italy. But America proved irresistible and after acquiring a wife, he returned to the New York area, playing hotel and theatre jobs until 1920, when he retired and moved to Connecticut where he lived with his son Joseph, a Hartford policeman.

There, it would seem, matters rested. However, one day in 1939, Joseph's twelve-year old son, Eugene asked his grandfather, "Grandpa, could I use one of your harps to take lessons?" "Son," his grandfather replied, "you can have both of the harps if you want them."

A SECOND OPINION

And so it was that Gene Bianco began harp study with his grandfather. His progress was impressive enough that within the year his father decided to get an outside opinion. He called in a certain Professor Daltry from Wesleyan University to hear Gene in order to determine if serious professional training would be appropriate. Daltry thought that it would.

Joseph Capobianco asked several professional musicians in the Hartford area whom they considered the world's greatest harpist to be. Based on their answer, Gene next found himself in New York playing for Marcel Grandjany, thus beginning a ten-year student-teacher relationship.

This involved weekly travel to New York from Hartford for lessons. Up until the Second World War began, his father would drive him into the city in a 1937 Dodge. After the war started, gasoline was rationed, and besides, Gene was old enough by then to travel into the city by himself on the train. After about a year, at one lesson Gene played an arrangement he had made of *The Bells of Saint Mary's*. Seeing a blossoming interest in making arrangements, Grandjany soon saw to it that each harp lesson was followed by a second lesson in solfège and harmony with his cousin, Juliette



Gene at age 12 with his grandfather, his first teacher (Note the European single-action harp)

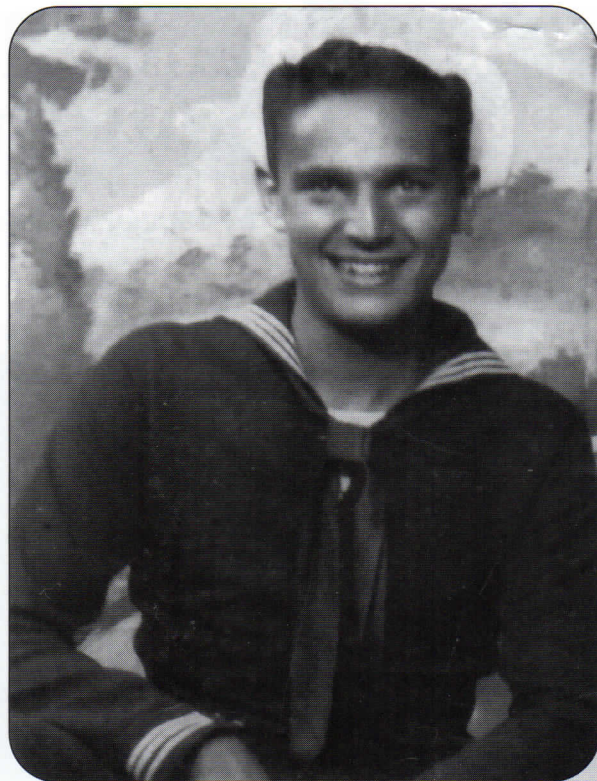
Georges Grandjany, who lived in the same apartment on West 71st Street. "That turned out to be very valuable," Gene says. "If you don't have a solid foundation in harmony, improvisation is almost impossible, or unimaginative at best."

Gene has no idea what the lessons cost. Each week he was given a sealed envelope which he handed over at the end of the hour, but was never told the amount of the enclosed check. Once he asked his father about it and was told that it was none of his business. "That's a matter between Mr. Grandjany, your mother and me." Period. End of conversation.

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT A SAILOR

But the war was still in progress, so upon turning eighteen, Gene enlisted in the U.S. Navy. It was called a "V-6" enlistment, involving service for the duration of the war (victory), plus six months.

Happily, he was assigned to tugboat duty at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and so was able to continue studying with Grandjany. And as soon as the war was finished and the obligatory six months were out of the way, he enrolled as a harp student under the G.I. Bill with Grandjany at The Juilliard School, from which he graduated in 1950.



Tugboat duty in the navy, Brooklyn, 1945

One of the highlights of his Juilliard days was a recital with the Manhattan Chamber Orchestra conducted by Charles Schiff in what was then called Carnegie Recital Hall or "Little Carnegie" (now Weill Hall). As well as the Ravel *Introduction et Allegro*, the recital featured the première of Grandjany's *Rhapsodie* in a new version for harp and chamber orchestra. Both Grandjany and Gene's father were in the audience.

"I was scared to death," Gene admits. But he acquitted himself well enough for the *New York Times* to comment that "Mr. Bianco's performance was brilliant. His conception of the impressionists was superb."

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Superb or not, there was the matter of making a living to be considered, so shortly after graduation, he auditioned for, and won, the position of first harp with the Radio City Music Hall Orchestra where he played for the next two years.

One of his auditors was the principal Radio City conductor Raymond Paige, who suggested a change—"I love your name and I love Eye-talians," Paige said. "But it's too long." So Eugene Capobianco became Gene Bianco.

"I'm sorry I did it," Gene says, "because it hurt my father very deeply. If I had it to do over, I wouldn't do it."

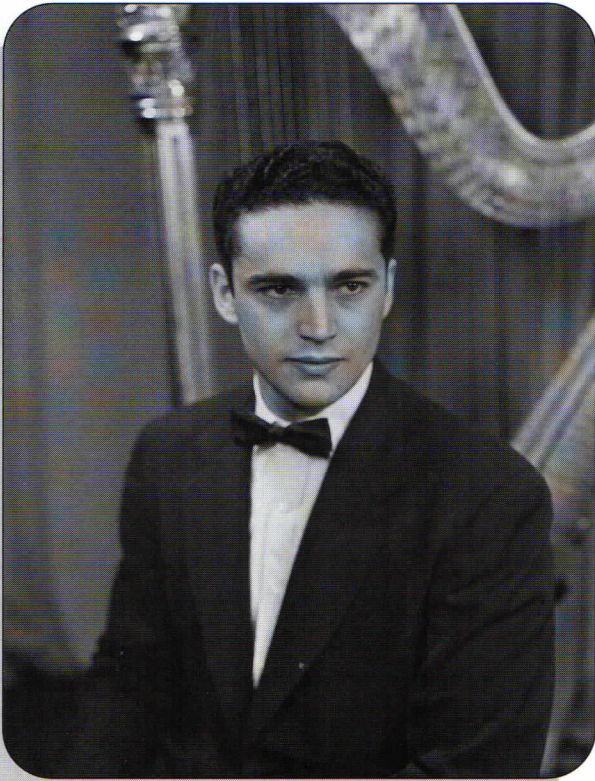
Over the years, his parents remained his number



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A publicity photo for Gene's recital at Little Carnegie Hall, 1949



With actress Judy Holliday at the Park Avenue Restaurant, 1954

one fans, his father maintaining a scrap book of clippings and reviews as well as taking still photographs of Gene's live television appearances by setting up a camera in front of the television set.

During this time Gene had begun to experiment with jazz, influenced largely by George Shearing's piano style and Bobby Hackett's cornet playing. He would listen to Shearing's recordings and transfer what he was hearing to the harp—such devices as using block chords and doubling the right hand melody with the thumb of the left hand. There was little precedent for the harp in jazz in those days, and so what he did, he did on his own.

NORTH OF THE BORDER

After the stint at Radio City, there was a period of solo engagements in various places, including a Canadian tour which saw appearances at the Fleur de Lis in Trois Rivières, La Porte St. Jean in Quebec City and the El Morocco in Montreal. The English language *Montreal Herald* reported that, "Apart from being a skilled musician, Bianco also has a fine sense of timing. He arranges his act in such a way that his private concert is over while the crowd still clamors for more. His special treatment of "Fascinatin' Rhythm" is drawing almost as much applause as his "Limehouse Blues."

Based on that review, his agent next booked him into New York's famous vaudeville house, the Palace, where he was headliner for a run in October of 1954. This was followed by an engagement at the Park Avenue Restaurant and the Hotel Lexington at 48th Street and Lexington Avenue. Reviews were uniformly good. *Variety* wrote that "Bianco impresses and appeals with his personable manner and diversified offerings. From the minor classics to such items as "Ebb Tide" and "Limehouse Blues" (the latter his recent waxing) Bianco's nimble fingers work with speed, precision and rhythm to please."

TELEVISION

But his career was soon to take a new direction. While playing at the Hotel Lexington, he was heard by Ernie Kovacs and his wife, Edie Adams, stars of the *Ernie Kovacs Show*, a combination comedy and variety show on NBC which ran for five days weekly for twenty-six weeks from December 1955 until July 1956. Gene ended up being a guest soloist on the show ten times.

There was also a guest solo appearance on January 17th, 1955, with Steve Allen on the *Tonight Show*. Allen introduced him as "one of the greatest jazz harpists today." The format for a guest appearance was the same

then as now. After playing, there was a bit of conversation in which Allen asked questions—"What are the pedals for? Why are the strings colored?" and so on.

Other appearances were on the NBC *Home* television show and the *Woolworth Hour* for CBS Radio. The conductor for the CBS orchestra was Victor Young who said that, "Gene is one of the very few harpists who has a great conception of jazz." It should be recalled that television broadcasting was "live" in those days, there being no opportunity to re-tape one's performance. If you made a mess of it, it was there for the whole listening world to hear. And see.

PUSH ME SOFTLY

Meanwhile, the record industry was taking note. For his first album, *Stringin' the Standards*, released in 1957 by RCA, his co-musicians were drummer Bobby Rosengarten, a staff musician at NBC, bassist Bill Feinbloom and the great jazz guitarist Mundell Lowe with whom he had worked on the Kovacs show. Gene did all the musical arrangements.

John S. Wilson, the *New York Times* jazz writer, wrote, "Whether he is playing a brooding solo or swinging freely along with Mundell Lowe, Gene Bianco's harp sparkles with a fresh, new sound—a legato flow rather than the staccato plink of harp strings plus a style that is more piano-like and chord-conscious than one customarily hears on a harp." This album is to be noted for its smooth combination of harp with guitar, a combination much imitated subsequently, but not easy to pull off because of the inbuilt antipathy of two plucked string instruments.

The recording got a powerful sendoff when Gene introduced it on the *Dave Garway Today Show* on July 27th.

His next album for RCA was *Harp, Skip and Jump*, issued in 1958. Again, Gene was the musical arranger. This album features Mundell Lowe in several numbers on both guitar and banjo, Joe Venuto from the Sauter-Finegan Orchestra on vibraphone, xylophone, marimba, celesta, tuned water glasses and various other percussions, as well as Don Lamond, a drummer originally from Woody Herman's group. Bassist for the group was Wendell Marshall who had been in Duke Ellington's orchestra from 1947 to 1955, but had resigned in order to concentrate on studio playing.

The problem with such a group, always, is the dynamic balance. The other musicians had to modify their playing so that the harp could be heard. "Push me, fellows," Gene told them, "but softly." The soft push was highly successful—the album sold 58,000 copies with enthusiastic reviews from both *Billboard* and *Cashbox*.



Gene in an RCA Victor publicity shot, 1962

Both albums were recorded in the RCA studios at 155 East 24th Street in New York City.

During this period three of his own compositions were published. *Harpin' Boogie* was issued in 1954, followed by *Harpicana*, in 1956, both by Mills Music. In 1958, Northern Music issued *Harp, Skip and Jump*, the title piece from the album.

HARP WITH ORCHESTRA

RCA next decided to feature "The Rainbow Sounds of Gene Bianco, his Harp and Orchestra" with a series of albums in a more romantic style. Robert Yorke, the chief executive officer of the company wanted a very full and luscious sound, so they put together an orchestra of sixty pieces with a wordless choral group of sixteen singers. It was the first time the studios had ever seen such a large group assembled to back up a harpist playing something other than classical music. "They really went bananas over it," Gene recalls. The harp sound was reinforced by the use of three contact microphones attached to the soundboard. The idea was to enable the harp to be heard without forcing the sound. The albums included *Music for a Summer Evening*, *Sweet Songs of Love*, *Your All-Time Favorite Songs*, *Music to Make Your Heart Sing!*, *The Wonderful Waltzes of Richard Rodgers* and a Christmas album, *Joy to the World*. This last album has

been said to be the best easy listening Christmas album ever made.

Because of the size of the group involved, the recording was made in the larger space of Webster Hall in lower Manhattan.

At the end of the six-album contract, Gene began life as a freelance session musician, ending up on dozens of great jazz albums with such performers as Paul Desmond, Gil Evans, Herbie Mann, Natalie Cole and Joe Lovano. For many of these jobs he acted not only as harpist but as contractor as well.

Other pop recordings by Mary J. Blige, D Train, Stevie Nicks and Alan Lorber also saw Gene's services as both harpist and contractor. There was also time to play harp for several Broadway shows including *Redhead*, *Tenderloin* and *Donnybrook*.

All these activities kept him occupied for over thirty years. Joe Venuto, who now lives in Nevada, was often associated with Gene over that time. During the preparation of this profile, I called Venuto to ask for any comments he might have about Gene and his playing. "Well," Venuto said, "he was one of the treasures we dug up. He was the only harpist who could really swing—that had that real jazz feel."

Probably the busiest contractor of that time in New York was Artie Kaplan, now retired and living in Florida. "He was," Kaplan says, "the most innovative harpist of his time, the most creative in his area. If a producer or arranger asked for a certain "feel," he could supply it. I would say that he was the harpist on probably sixty or seventy hit recordings of the day—more than any other harpist in the country—possibly in the world."

The life of a sessions player was a mixed bag. On the plus side was the money. On the minus side was the fact that your name appeared nowhere on the recording. So the busiest harpists in New York in the 60's and 70's are not as well known as they should be. These include not only Gene but Margaret Ross and Gloria Agostini as well. The three of them did the overwhelming majority of all commercial recordings in the city.

And it may well be that they were the last of their kind, for the use of studio musicians, particularly for so-called "jingle" dates, has been largely displaced by the use of synthesizers.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Let me conclude with a personal note. Over those years I had gotten out of touch with Gene. Then a few months ago Grace Paradise (currently the harpist for the Broadway revival of *Oklahoma!*) called me with a question. She had come across a website devoted to

popular music that mentioned Gene's career, in which it was said that he was born in Hartford, in 1927, but that he died in New York, in 1995. "Is this true?" she asked. "I don't think so," I replied. "Let me check it out." So I called him with a pertinent question. "Gino," I asked, "are you alive?"

Happily, it turned out that he is. He does little playing these days, but remains active in the recording industry as a music coordinator, being responsible for hiring the musicians, orchestrator, arranger, etc., for any particular session. And while he was never interested in teaching, he has some advice for those interested in a professional career. First of all is adequate preparation. This includes a study of solfège and harmony, above and beyond the ability to get around the instrument with facility and power. "There's more to it than fast fingers," he says. "When someone asks for a G-seven-flat-nine, you have to know what the hell he's talking about."

About the author:

While probably best known for his educational publications for harp, Sam Milligan served for over forty years as a harp technician, primarily in the New York City area. Now retired, he spends his time in working on new transcriptions and arrangements as well as in travel. ☺☺

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