

on the lighter side

Jazz Harpist Dorothy Ashby

by Carrol McLaughlin

Dorothy Ashby plays jazz harp because she loves it. Though jazz is her speciality, she does not consider herself solely a "jazz harpist." "In the time people spend labeling things," she says, "they could be perfecting them. I wanted to be good at what I liked—I loved jazz, and did it!"

Playing jazz on the harp followed a natural progression for Dorothy. At a young age she began learning chords on the piano from her father who was a jazz guitarist. Dorothy still considers jazz chords and their alterations her specialty, recalling those first lessons and her feeling of, "Ah, that's for me!"

Dorothy's roots go back to Detroit where she grew up a few blocks from the site of the 1967 riots. In the depression days, Dorothy's father made his living by traveling the Midwest with a five-man jazz group. He later left music to work as a truck driver because it offered a more secure living. Though the family was poor, Dorothy recalls that "artistic priorities were the highest priorities of their lives."

Dorothy was able to attend Cass Technical High School in Detroit, and later Wayne State University. She majored in Music Education, with piano as her applied instrument. In Detroit she had a lot of professional experience as a pianist working part-time for the Parks and Recreation Department, touring schools, and sight-reading for tap and ballet classes. She was the piano accompanist for the best vocal studio in town, a job which allowed her to become aware of good musical literature. Dorothy also played jazz jobs with her father on guitar and her brother playing flute and saxophone.

Dorothy completed all but the final segment of her Bachelor's Degree in Music Education. She began the "practice teaching" portion of the course, and it took her two weeks to decide that she hated it. She "stuck it out" for a year and then quit. She then worked as a single pianist in clubs in Detroit, and only later obtained a harp and began to work with a bass player and drummer.

Her groups were quite successful and played regularly in Detroit clubs such as the Garfield Lounge and Café Gourmet. They also did special tours to Canada, Bermuda, and the East Coast. Dorothy calls these years the "Golden Age of Jazz in Detroit." Often the players in her group were recognized by the big names in jazz and moved to New York to play with musicians such as Miles Davis and George Shearing. Dorothy's first big break came when the Count Basie band came to Detroit where Dorothy was playing in a club. Frank Wess, flute-and-sax man with the Basie band, asked Dorothy to come to New York and cut a record.

The record was "Jazz Harpist Dorothy Ashby," recorded in 1957 with Frank Wess, flute, and three other New York musicians. They only had one day in the studio,



Dorothy Ashby

with no time to rehearse or make cuts. Dorothy had written down the chord changes for the bass player, plus any special breaks. The tunes included *Stella by Starlight* and four original compositions by Dorothy. The record made her almost instantly famous. She received letters from Europe, from people everywhere who loved her music; she even received mail from soldiers in the Korean War who had heard her record.

Dorothy's second album was also recorded with Frank Wess in New York. She remembers driving 22 hours through a snowstorm to New York, after which she recorded immediately. After the session she drove straight back to Detroit because she had a job. This album was first called "Hip Harp," then re-released by Prestige Records as "The Best of Dorothy Ashby." After this, the record dates "just began to come." Her numerous other records include "The Fantastic Jazz Harp of Dorothy Ashby" and "Soft Winds/The Swinging Harp of Dorothy Ashby," both recorded in New York. In Chicago she recorded "The Rubaiyat of Dorothy Ashby," "Dorothy Ashby," "Dorothy's Harp," and "Dorothy Ashby Afro-Harping."

It was George Shearing's manager who first arranged Dorothy's dates to play with such greats as Louis Armstrong. She also worked with Lionel Hampton in New York, Woody Herman in Detroit, Duke Ellington in Washington and Detroit, Dizzy Gillespie, and many others.

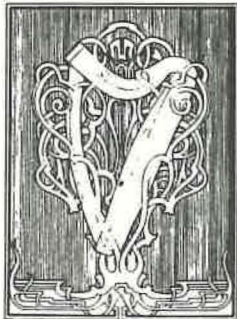
In 1973 Dorothy moved to Los Angeles with her husband, John, who is a writer and artist. She works regularly in the recording industry, and has recorded with such artists as Stevie Wonder, Johnny Mathis, Stanley Turrentine, Dionne Warwick, and the group "Earth, Wind, and Fire." She performs occasionally at jazz clubs in the Los Angeles area. She also teaches, and derives great pleasure

CELTIC FOLK HARPS

PLEASE WRITE FOR OUR
CURRENT BROCHURE'

CASWELL HARPS

14690 Carrier Lane, Guerneville CA 95446



from "disseminating information to those who want it or appreciate it." Dorothy enjoys playing her music for her colleagues. She says, "Gratification is knowing that those who know and appreciate my music think it's great and invaluable. This to me is success."

"Jazz is the music of Black America," Dorothy feels. "You are more apt to be superior in it if you are black and understand the musical heredity: polyrhythms, polyphonic melodies, and the complexities of these rhythms and melodies—with their creative and spontaneous nature—that have been passed on through generations." Yet jazz is not a form closed to other people. "If you spend enough time understanding what's going on, you can become good at it." Jazz has its own rigorous discipline. It has more chords and more complex rhythms than, for example, rock music. "The beauty and discipline of jazz," Dorothy says, "is being able to create a certain amount of music within a certain amount of musical time, and there are infinite possibilities."

As Dorothy's friend Louis Armstrong said, "It ain't whatcha do, it's the way what'cha do it." And Dorothy really does it!



Publicity photo of Dorothy Ashby used by John Levy,
one of her first managers

"State-of-the art achievements"
San Francisco Chronicle



ANNE ADAMS—HARP
JANE GALANTE—PIANO

SOUND STORAGE RECORDINGS

announce a

SALZEDO Centennial Release

Sonata for Harp and Piano
Chanson dans la Nuit
Fraicheur

With the Sonata for Harp
by Darius Milhaud

Pre-publication price: \$9.95
plus \$1.00 shipping
(CA residents add sales tax)
Price after April, 1983: \$13.95
Allow eight weeks for delivery

Previous releases include:

SSR 2020
Bondon: Le Soleil Multicolore
Debussy: Sonata No. 2 for
flute, viola and harp

SSR 2030
Saint-Saens: Fantaisie
Ravel: Piece en forme de habanera
for violin and harp

To recreate the natural sound, no mixing, gain-riding or editing has been used. Pressings are on 100% Teldec virgin vinyl.

Order from: SOUND STORAGE RECORDING
166 Homestead Boulevard
Mill Valley, CA 94941