

# The Cappy Barra Story

by Art M. Daane  
from the memoirs of.....



**Nat Bergman**

Nat Bergman, alias Nate Burton, was born in Waterbury, Connecticut. It was in 1928, when he first got interested in music and particularly the harmonica.

## **The early days**

**Nat;** "My oldest brother was the one elected for any formal musical training. I was one of four children, two older brothers and a younger sister. Even though my brother had a tin ear, he was the one who got the piano lessons. Whenever the piano teacher came to the house and whenever my brother practiced, I hung in the background listening and absorbing it all. So I became a half baked musician although I really had the capacity to be a complete musician with any amount of discipline and training."

When the family moved to New York, early in 1929, his folks went into partnership with some friends that they knew in the old country in Odessa, Russia. They opened a laundry on Mermaid Avenue in Coney Island; they lived in an apartment behind the store. There was no longer a piano to tinker with.

**Nat;** "The very first time I accumulated the whopping sum of \$1.50, I bought an Auto Valve Harp which was made by the Hohner Harmonica Company. It was a double reed instrument; notes in each double hole played an octave apart, making it sound like an echo chamber. No matter how hard I tried, I could never get a clear note on this harmonica. Every once in a while, I'd pull it out and work it, but to no avail. The other adjacent notes would creep in and create a discordant sound. I found this very frustrating."

They left Coney Island and moved to Bensonhurst on 86th Street in a flat over a store where every five minutes the West End elevated train roared by their bedroom window, it was at this time that the depression hit. His father took a job as a shirt ironer for a laundry chain in New York but lost it shortly after. He took a shot at being a cab driver.

**Nat;** " I vividly remember one Sunday morning leaving for the golf course (I was lucky enough to get a caddy badge at the Dyker Heights G.C.) at 5:30 in the morning, caddying all day, and when I got home, I came to an empty apartment. Everything was gone, the furniture, everything. I was tired and hungry. I sat down on the front stoop and waited. Soon my father came by, picked me up and we took the elevated train to our apartment on 74th Street and 20th Avenue."

This incident marked the beginning of moving to a new apartment every two months because there were lots of empty apartments and most landlords advertised one-month rent free if you took the apartment and paid one months rent in advance.

**Nat;** " I was with my mother looking for another apartment in Bensonhurst on 85th Street, between Bay Parkway and 23rd Avenue, when I heard someone playing a harmonica on a porch quite close by. I was intrigued with the sound since it was clear, sweet note. Something I had never been able to master on my harmonica. I went up on the porch and saw a fellow, about my own age, playing a harmonica. "How do you do that?" I asked him. "Get off my porch" was the answer. I was so desperate to find the answer that I grabbed him by the throat and said; "I'll get off your porch when you show me how to do that." "Use your tongue." he gasped..."Now get off my porch." I couldn't wait to get home and try this suggested method. Sure enough, after several experimental tries using my tongue, I began to get a clear note."

According to Nat, experimenting with his tongue without any formal teaching, he developed a method of getting a single note that goes against the teaching methods suggested by the Hohner Harmonica Company's booklet, in which they tell you to cover three holes with your tongue and the clear note will automatically comes through the side of your mouth.

**Nat;** "The type of harmonica I had, had double vertical holes with the reeds in each hole tuned an octave apart. I put my tongue into the lower vertical hole, and so only the single reed responds since my tongue in the lower hole was blocking out the lower octave reed. By starting to play this way I would say that I probably play the harmonica differently than any other harmonica player."

After changing to a Marine Band and then graduating to the chromatic, Nat still played the same way, and kept his tongue directly under the hole.

**Nat;** "Somehow I could develop tremendous technique that way, also when I realized that I was not playing according to instructions, I tried the other method and found that I could get tremendous effects by playing notes a fifth apart from both sides of my mouth, and by working my mouth in that manner I could get thirds and other effects that enhanced my playing when I had no accompaniment."

The young man whom he treated so roughly on the porch became one of his dearest friends. His mother had taken the apartment a few houses down from where he lived and when we moved in, he looked him up and showed him that he had already conquered the clear note, and from that time on they started to play together. This was Sam Sperling.

**Nat;** "We began to play together, simple tunes like 'My Bonnie Lies Over The Ocean', 'Old

Black Joe' and so on. It was at this point that I realized I had a natural knack of playing harmonies to Sammy's leads."

They went to the same High School and one time when Nat stayed out of school with a case of flu, Sammy went to see him after school and said; "I have met a harmonica player who is better than the two of us combined." Nat couldn't believe it since he thought he was getting pretty good himself. The next day Sammy brought this harmonica player to Nat's house. His name was 'Phil Solomon'. He whipped out his harmonica and played 'The second Hungarian Rhapsody' with special effects.

**Nat;** "I had never dreamed this possible on the harmonica, he made it sound like a whole orchestra. Phil took us under his wing and we became a trio."

### **The Amateurs**

Under Phil's tutelage, Nat began to pick up on the harmonica pretty well. He was never one to be content with the status quo and asked Phil endless questions about his technique. Phil always obliged and soon he was playing much more complicated songs as well as his own version of the 2nd Hungarian Rhapsody. They got together every day and developed into a very fine group. They were playing at a party one Saturday night when a person came over to them and suggested we come down to his father's radio station in Brooklyn to audition for a sustaining program. The man thought they were good enough to make it. It was station WLTH. They auditioned and got a sustaining program. They were given a weekly program of fifteen minutes. This meant that they would have to do a lot of rehearsing since they had to come up with at least five new tunes each week.

**Nat;** "This put a strain on our academic achievements since we couldn't find time to do all our home work, but the improvement of the trio was astounding." Even on the day we were to do their program we would get on the subway and seek out a cubicle in the car where the engineer of the train would sit if it was the lead car, and rehearse the songs for the upcoming broadcast till the last minute. Our theme song was 'Indian Love Call'."

One day they took a gig to play at a wedding reception at a Synagogue somewhere on the Lower East Side in Manhattan, which was even at that time a notoriously bad neighborhood. They got there rather early. Phil said, "You know, I used to live just a few blocks from here several years ago, there was a drug store on the corner and we lived about half way down the block." As they neared the corner Phil looked into the drug store window and said, "Wow, that's the same man who ran the store when we lived here." They walked over to the apartment house that Phil used to live in. It was a cold November night, they had overcoats on and their harmonicas were in their inside pockets. Suddenly a police car pulled up, two cops jumped out of the car and ordered them to spread their legs and put their hands against the wall.

**Nat;** "We complied, and they frisked us. They felt the harmonicas. "They're armed!" said one of the cops. He reached carefully into the inside pocket and pulled out a harmonica. "What the hell is this?" The other cop came up with the same result. The cops handed us back our harmonicas, grumbled something under their breath and drove away."

They started to play amateur nights, most of the theatres had an amateur night once a week, there were three prizes given out to the top three performers, \$25-15-10. They always wound up

second, the stumbling block was usually a child performer with very little talent but lots of appeal. It was at this time that Nat's family moved again. This time it was Brighton Beach in Brooklyn. It was another one of his families' famous moves.

**Nat;** " We got together one night and pooled all our money, between the six of us we came up with just under \$400.00, my father bought a hand laundry on Brighton and 6th Street. We all worked in this store from morning till night. Through this effort we managed to have a beautiful apartment, just off the boardwalk."

They began to play on the boardwalk in the evening and would always gather a crowd that would throw them nickels and dimes. One evening a young man joined them, he had a chair with him with rungs going up the back, and he whipped out a pair of drumsticks and beat a terrific rhythm behind their music. The young man playing with them was 'Buddy Rich'. He didn't stay with them very long. They had him on their local radio program for a while but suddenly he moved on and did very well for himself afterwards.

### **The Semi-Professionals**

Borrah Minevitch was at the Brooklyn Paramount Theatre when they decided to go and see the act and go backstage to try and see Borrah Minevitch sent Mike Chimes down to listen to them. He was very impressed with what he heard and asked them to play for him individually. Mike was very impressed with Phil's and Nat's playing and had Borrah listen to them. Phil had just graduated from high school and Nat was in his last term. Minevitch told Phil that he would hire him and Nat could join after his graduation too. Several days later Phil had a telegram from Minevitch to join the Rascals in Boston, and that broke up the trio. One evening Mike Chimes called Nat, he had left Minevitch and was forming a harmonica group and wanted Nat and Sam to join him.

**Nat;** " Sammy and I jumped at the chance. Mike had arranged for a rehearsal hall at the Brooklyn Boys Club, and it was there that we met Sam Scheckter. Mike had several other players in the group whose name's I do not recall."

Mike insisted that they begin to learn to read music. He made arrangements for them and they converted the actual notes to a numbered blow and draw system, and by doing this over a period of time they suddenly realized that they could read the music without converting. They began to play some very serious music, no comedy, and after months of rehearsal Mike brought an agent down to listen to them in the hopes that they could begin to take bookings. After listening, the agent said, "Very interesting but not commercial enough." He told them to inject some comedy relief. This was exactly what Mike was trying to get away from and told the agent he would find someone else. There was terrific pressure from their families for them to go out and get real jobs. A man named Maurice Duke came into the picture at this time. He had polio when he was a child, and both legs were affected. On one leg he wore a brace and he got around with a cane. He was massive from the waist up, very muscular, with a fiercely handsome face, curly hair and eyes that were always laughing. He had a harmonica group that was sponsored by the 'Postal Telegraph Company'.



**Maurice Duke**

**Nat;** "Duke's group was on the order of the Rascals, long on comedy, short on music. Duke had met a gentleman named Carl Freed who had a hokey group of musicians that also were strong on comedy and weak on music. Carl was intrigued with the idea of having a harmonica group and made a deal with Duke to take over his group."

In the meantime Mike had informed Duke that he had a harmonica group that was far superior to what they were involved with.

Nat; "Duke then had Carl listen to our group and was so impressed with what he heard that he decided to get rid of most of the players in Duke's group and use our group instead."



**Carl Freed & Co**

Duke stayed on with Freed as business manager.

**Nat;** "Duke played a terrific marine band and played the best blues harmonica I'd ever heard. Carl Freed insisted that there had to be comedy in the act and Duke introduced Sid Gold. Carl and Sid seemed to be made for each other and developed a comedy routine that was quite funny. We were playing much better music and that seemed to satisfy Mike."

Carl wanted a departure from the many groups around, especially the Minevitch group and so he came up with the idea of dressing them as clowns. The 'Carl Freed Harmonica Band' then became 'Carl Freed and his Harmonica Harlequins' with Mike Chimes, Sid Gold, Charley Lopez, Eddie Fox, Phil Solomon, Nat Bergman, Max Cravitz, Murray Liebeskind, Sam Scheckter and

Milton Freeman.

After weeks of rehearsals at the Nola Studios on 46th Street in New York, Carl came in one day and said, "We're opening our first engagement in Willomantic, Connecticut. Carl taught Sid Gold all about timing and they developed into a strong comedy team. Their first engagement proved a success. Their music and comedy blended well. Back in New York they refined the act in both directions, and anxiously waited for the break.



**Carl Freed Harmonica Harlequins**

**Nat;** "Freed informed us that we were booked into the Proctor Theatre in Troy, N.Y. for one week with an option for a second if the picture was strong enough to warrant a holdover. We left for Troy on the Hudson River Night Line at about 7pm from a pier on the waterfront around 42nd Street. We were thrilled. I remember buying a Dr. Grabow Yellow Bowl Pipe, a rain slicker with hat to match and a pouch full of Briggs tobacco. The taste was that bad that I threw up and threw the pipe and tobacco overboard, also the rain slicker and hat."

After Troy, they began to get many show bookings, mostly Vaudeville. The Loews' and R.K.O Keith's Vaudeville Theatre chains. Then, the Hohner Harmonica Company launched a nationwide radio program to arouse interest in the harmonica and musical expression, featuring the group.

The Music Trades of February 1935, "Hohner Harmonicas Go On the Air, starting February 23." The motive of this gigantic broadcast was not only to stimulate further popularity in Hohner harmonicas but also to 'carry on' the Hohner program of developing active participation in the art of musical expression through the interlocutory step of mastering the harmonica. The Carl Freed Harmonica Harlequins were known from coast to coast through vaudeville and other concert appearances, they were considered one of the finest groups of harmonica players that have ever been presented before the public.

The Hohner broadcast made its debut on Saturday evening, February 23, at 7:45 E.S.T. and continued every Saturday evening. Among the stations that carried these Hohner programs were: WOR, N.Y: WXYZ, Detroit: WLW, Cincinnati; and WGN, Chicago. It was announced that these four super stations reached more than 57% of the total radio-listening audience in the United States. Meaning an audience of well over a million people, and possibly twice that number. Hohner had prepared elaborate display and promotional literature, beautifully printed in colors,

for the use of music merchants spreading the message of this unique and highly interesting broadcast. It was the Hohner Organization's aim to make their broadcast programs as effective and musically valuable as they could, in order that music stores everywhere would enjoy stimulated sales of Hohner harmonicas, as well as other musical instruments.

A strictly entertaining program was carried out during the broadcasts, with a very limited message on Hohner harmonicas. It was believed, however, that as a result of these broadcasts many newcomers would be added to the steadily growing list of harmonica players.

In conjunction with this nation-wide broadcast program, M. Hohner, Inc. sponsored an extensive national advertising campaign in national magazines, as well as the comic supplement that was furnished weekly to a large group of newspapers in various cities where millions of people were reached. Among the national magazines used were: "Popular Mechanics," "Boys Life," "Modern Mechanix," "Open Road for Boys," "Popular Science Monthly" "American Girl" and "American Boy."

Jobbers as well as many leading music merchants gave the Hohner broadcast program their fullest support in bringing this event to the attention of the public.

Hohner was very cooperative.

**Nat;** "They worked with us as far as any ideas were concerned, making new types of harmonicas. One of the things they worked out with us was making a Super Chromatic an octave lower than their regular model, so that we could have a sax section, the higher harmonica being the trumpet section."

An entry in Nat's diary dated January 12, 1935 tells how he and Sam went to Woolworth to buy some necessities, and also some paper to be used to make a diagram for the new chord harmonica Mr. Freed wanted Hohner to make for them.

More entries from Nat's diary. January 24, 1935 it states that Charley Lopez and Eddie Fox were both fired. Al Furbish and Jimmy Thorpe, both with Minevitch, replaced Charley and Eddie.

Another entry states, Albert N. Hoxie and his Philadelphia Harmonica Band were getting a spot or two on their broadcasts. February 6, 1935 tells, Carl Freed has decided that they should all have dark blue suits and arranged to have them custom made at 18 dollars a piece. These were for the Hohner Radio Broadcasts starting on February 23, 1935. February 17, 1935, at the Metropolitan Theatre in Boston, have to do a benefit. Polly Moran is on the bill and Milton Berle, who is at an opposition theatre, will also perform.

The demands on the Hohner broadcast program made it necessary for a greater turnout of material, therefore Leo Lafell and Joe Sands were attracted to join Carl's group. Both were accomplished musicians, while Joe was an accomplished arranger as well.

**Nat;** "Joe could turn out arrangements at a faster clip than anyone else in the group, so Carl delegated Joe to do this. Since Joe was into Swing and Jazz, he opened up a whole new avenue of music for us. We began doing classics also."

The act itself was still on the order of any other group, the combination of harmonica hoke and comedy.

**Nat;** "Joe hated the hoke and insisted that class should be emphasized. Dissention began to build up and soon there was a private meeting where we decided it was time to break away from Freed and start our own group. We rehearsed a group of players and taught them the complete act."

Freed got a little suspicious of what was happening and reminded us all at a special meeting that he had us all under contract and that if anything or anyone got an idea of striking off for themselves, he would see to it that we never played in the theatre again. We somehow managed to make the contract disappear forever." As in one breath Nat continues; "we all met at my apartment, my mother made a special luncheon and we burnt the contract in one of our favorite pots. Some of the antics of that afternoon drove my mother half out of her mind and she swore that she would never have that bunch of wild Indians at the house again."

Carl in the meantime got a series of bookings, about eight weeks of work. He dangled this in front of their noses.

**Nat;** " Sid Gold and Mike Chimes decided to leave the new formed group and stay with Freed, the rest of us would not be tempted. We began to rehearse and put an entirely new act together."

**Variety** of August 1935, "Carl Freed is quitting vaudeville to enter the dance band field with his harmonica aggregation as the first mouth organ outfit for hooperies on record. The 18-piece Freed 'band' will be all harmonicas with exception of a bass fiddle. Use of harmonicas akin to regular musical instruments permits use of regulation dance orchestrations."

Due to the size of the original group one can imagine that neither of the two groups would be troubled by this separation.

## **A New Start**

They still couldn't conceive of having a straight musical act and felt they needed comedy relief.

**Nat;** "That's when Duke brought in Phil King for comedy and Harry Morton to lead the group, in addition to the fact that he owned a Lincoln (1928) limo which they desperately needed for transport."

Their first engagement brought them to the Cameo in Endicott, N.Y. Red Skelton was the M.C. They got last billing. An excerpt from a newspaper clipping by J.B.T. tells; "Harry Morton presents his 'Harmonica Swing Band.' These players, with mouth organs of all sizes and with multiple consoles (if that be the proper term for a harmonica with more than one row of reeds), are better than Borrah Minevitch's Rascals. They have remarkable presence for radio artists, and their comedy is well timed and nicely executed."

Their next job was at Dorney Park, an amusement park with various games surrounding a large outdoor arena with a bowl like stage. A long drive was ahead of them.

**Nat;** "There was an act called "Low, Height and Stanley," a comedy act consisting of a very tiny midget, a normal person (Stanley) and Height who stood over seven foot tall. They were on the same bill and were also booked into the next date. They asked if they could travel with us. Of course the car was very crowded as we drove off into the night. At three o'clock in the morning we spotted a diner going through a small town, there were 11 of us in the car. We entered the diner to find the proprietor fast asleep at the end of the counter. Harry cued us to be quiet, he went behind the counter, started the grill, got the coffee going, threw a gang of eggs and a rasher of bacon on the grill and when everything was about ready he alarmed the owner on the back and said, "Wake up damn it, we're busy." He jumped up, and at Harry's prodding got juice and water and silver ware, then suddenly stopped and said to Harry, "Who the hell are you?"

They got to Dorney Park early in the morning, checked into the boarding house, where they usually made a deal for rooms, breakfast and dinner for about \$4.00 for the stay (a three day stand).

**Nat;** "After rehearsing with the orchestra we wandered onto the grounds, came upon a concession where you threw three baseballs at wooden bottles. Harry told us to whisper in the crowd that Johnny Pace was going to throw at the bottles. A small crowd began to gather while Harry was putting up a show stepping forward and backwards to find the right spot to throw from. Harry had found the spot at about one hundred feet away, he turned around and walked away without ever throwing a ball."

Duke had a habit of saying that he could never sleep in a traveling car. Usually he sat in the front. They had all started to smoke pipes or good cigars. Duke generally smoked cigars but since the boys all took up the pipe, he decided to buy one but never went for the accessories like a pouch, tobacco or pipe cleaners.

**Nat;** "When he decided to smoke a pipe he would throw it into the back of the car without turning around. Someone was always ready to catch it since Duke never turned to see where it had landed. Sammy Scheckter caught it this time and proceeded to fill it with a layer of hair, ends of matches, some more hair and then a little layer of tobacco on top. Duke also expected, whoever filled the pipe, to light it as well. Sammy did so very carefully and handed it to Duke. A few puffs and then a whoosh of flame, a cloud of foul smelling smoke and then Duke threw it out of the car and went back to cigar smoking. A little while later he fell asleep and we jammed the brakes and screamed; "look out! We made sure Duke never slept in the car since he insisted he never sleeps in a car."

Phil King, the comedian in the act, was a short stocky fellow who looked like he was always drunk, and had slept with his clothes on.

**Nat;** "Harry Morton gave Phil a birthday gift, an electric pants presser, it did no good since Phil still looked as if he had slept in his clothes. Duke had a habit of sending whoever was closest to him, after the completion of a trip, out to get his pants pressed.

**Nat;** "On this occasion he threw his pants at Harry Morton. Harry went to Phil's room, took his pants presser and put six creases on each pant leg, he then brought the pants to Dukes room and laid them on the bed. We were all aware of what was happening and were stationed outside the room listening. Duke said to Harry; "Got to see the manager the manager of this theater". "Got to draw some money before we open. I have to look sharp, so he won't think were up against it". Yah, Harry said. Duke got to the pants, put them on and looked at himself in the full-length mirror. "What the hell is this?" he yelled. Harry replied; "That's the new Duke of Kent style, six creases on each leg. If you were taller you could have eight creases".

Some of the guys outside the room broke up, Duke heard it, realized we had gotten to him once again. "From now on no more friends, strictly business" Duke said. These bad moods of his usually lasted about twenty minutes."

The Duke stories are endless, one of the most famous was when Harry Morton decided it would be a great idea if they cut an eighth of an inch off Dukes cane every day, and replace the rubber cap each time.

**Nat;** "After about a week of this, Harry said to Duke; "You know, I think this may sound crazy Duke, but I have the distinct feeling that you are getting taller". Duke thought about that for a

while and said to Harry; "you may think this is crazy, but I have the same feeling. I feel as if the cane is not making the same contact with the ground than I'm used to."

## **A New Image**

They were still playing small theatres and club dates, barely making ends meet. It was then that they decided to possibly change their image. Duke immediately thought it was another gag that they had concocted. Henry Nemo, in those days a struggling songwriter with a tremendous imagination, was urged to join the group with the thought of changing the act completely. They would then have a combination of characters that was explosive.

Some time in February they were booked into a theatre in Providence. They had just bought Paul Ash's six-cylinder caddy limo for \$200.00. Paul Ash was the bandleader at the Roxy Theatre in New York. They really had to scratch up the money. The car did 4 miles to the gallon. The car was black with New York plates; it really looked like a car that was tailor made for the mob. In those days one could buy seven gallons of gasoline for one dollar. It started to snow when they arrived in Providence.

**Nat;** "We rehearsed with the pit band and did our four shows the first day. After the last show, at 22:30, Duke wanted to visit a friend just outside Providence. The storm had increased in intensity but we couldn't talk Duke out of going so we all jumped into the car and took off. I was driving and the storm had gone real bad. I came to a crossing as the lights turned red, although I applied the brakes very gently the car still went into a skid. I immediately released the brakes, gunned the car and went through the lights. Unknown to us, there was a cop on the corner who witnessed the entire proceedings. Just after we arrived at the house of Dukes friend there was a knock on the door, it was the police. "Who owns the car outside?" Duke immediately shouted; "Me". "You're under arrest". Duke asked; "What for?" The policeman said; "There's a call out all over New England for the car and warning that the occupants could possibly be dangerous". We explained that we were a harmonica band playing in Providence and visiting a friend. They told us to stay for at least an hour so that they could clear the call. Duke insisted to go immediately. Within ten minutes we came to a police barricade. I stopped the car and suddenly a policeman shouted; "It's them!" Suddenly we were looking into the barrels of drawn revolvers. One of them said to me; "Get out of the car, put your hands on top of your head!" When I got out he instructed me to spread my legs and lean against the car. I did and he frisked me. Of course he felt the harmonica and shouted; "He's armed!" When they saw the harmonica the call came over the police radio that the black caddy, license plates N.Y. 1234 was cleared. They gave us an escort back to Providence."

Nemo stayed with the group for quite some time. He was a very talented young man, one with a million laughs. But week after week he still hadn't come up with any ideas for the act.

**Nat;** "We finally were booked at Steel Pier in Atlantic City. Nemo had invited us to a party at a private home, which turned out to be a Pot Party. Nemo was using a coconut with a hole on top in which he inserted the reefer and smoked it thru a hole at the end. When we had enough we found Nemo lying on the floor, and as we picked him up he started screaming; "Don't lay me down!" The very next day Nemo shut himself in his room. No food, no drink and begged him to come out, but to no avail. After about twelve hours he came out with a bunch of papers in his hand, gathered us all around him and said; "Gentlemen, I have your new act. From now on you will be known as the Cappy Barra Harmonica Gentlemen. You will dress in tails, dispense all

comedy and become a straight musical act." He then proceeded to give us our opening number. Nemo had a way of presenting it so we could picture the whole idea. We would now call ourselves Harmonica Gentlemen."



**Cappy Barra Harmonica Gentlemen**

### **The Musicians**

Since they all could read music, they were going to play regular arrangements and emulate the big bands, play jazz and the current swing music.

**Nat;** "We rehearsed the new act very diligently, hours upon hours. We ordered tails from London Styles. Each of us was custom fit, and we broke the act in while in Atlantic City. Art Jarrett was the headliner on the bill with us. He followed us the first time we did the new act. We stopped the show cold. Art requested the manager of the theatre to let him go on before us since he couldn't hold the audience after we had been on. The change was good for Art. We got very friendly with him. He was married to Eleanor Holmes at the time, and had just received a telegram from her that their marriage was over, and invited us out for a bash one night. We never turned down freebees like that and were very sympathetic."

After playing the Steel Pier they were booked into a very intimate nightclub in Atlantic City. They became a real hit there too. Armed with this new material they began to make great strides. Auditioned for NBC for a sustaining radio program and got it. A 15-minute Coast-to-Coast program in prime time, which earned them \$115.00 per week for the entire group.

**Nat;** "Since Lee and Joe lived in Philly, we took an apartment in a brownstone on 52nd street for Lee and Joe to live in, we also used it for rehearsals. Since all others lived at home, we sponged off our parents and also picked up occasional club dates to barely sustain us. When our costumes were ready we didn't have the money to pay for them. My parents had a boarder who had a job with a printing company. I persuaded him to lay out the money for the costumes (\$250.00). We verbally promised him a piece of the action if we were ever to make it big. I can't recall ever paying him back."

The next thirteen weeks they did the sustaining program. Joe did all the arrangements for the group. They got very adept at reading that they would actually play the arrangements perfectly the first time the parts were handed to them.

**Nat;** "I became the soloist and had to learn a new classical piece every week. It was then that we began to tackle the heavy classics. Joe would arrange a cut down version. One of the classics we did was the Poet and Peasant Overture. It was an immediate smash and later we put it in the act. It never failed to stop the show cold wherever we performed it. As a result of the exposure we were getting from the coast-to-coast program we began to get a lot fan mail, but more importantly we began to get offers for jobs."

They did a 13-week program on transcriptions for a company called World Wide Transcriptions, all in one night. These transcriptions were played all through the south. I have never been able to get a copy. I am sure that the Cappy Barra transcriptions are gathering dust in many a small radio station in the Southlands. I'm sure that some of the titles I have in my collection will be on the transcription tapes, such as:

**Harmonica ride - Stardust - Flight of the bumble bee - Mood Indigo - Voodoo - Solitude - Casa Loma stomp - Mendelsohn's Violin Concerto - Poet + peasant - I love to whistle - Bavarian waltz theme - Tea for two - The man I love - Sheik of Araby - Hungarian dance no. 5 - Spring tonic - Ridin' the reeds - When did you leave heaven - Come out wherever you are.**

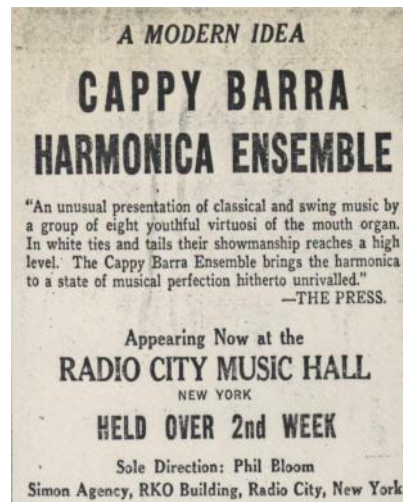
They got an offer to do the CBS Swing Concerts. Every big band in the business was booked for this occasion.

**Nat;** "We followed Glen Gray and the Casa Loma Band, we pulled their arrangement of Casa Loma Stomp out of their book, sat in the bandstand and played it right there. The guys in the band flipped. Louis Armstrong closed the show and it was a smash. We were then booked for the 52nd Club, which was known as the Swing Alley. Leon Prima (Louis' brother) was the band and we did two shows a night there. Filling in between sessions was a beautiful gal named Hazel Scott; she played the greatest jazz piano. One evening I began to jam with her and it was then that I found I could improvise on the harmonica just like a sax or trumpet. Whenever Hazel and I would jam we would draw crowds. Much later I met Hazel one afternoon on 46th and Broadway. We hugged and kissed on the street and started walking hand in hand up Broadway never realizing that we had stopped traffic on the street in all directions. To those who don't know Hazel, she was black and very beautiful. As a matter of fact she married Adam Clayton Powell much later."

## **The Professionals**

They were managed by the Ferde Simon Agency at this time and were booked for a series of small vaudeville theaters, mostly for three-day weekends. They were playing in a small theater in Philadelphia when they received a telegram from Phil Bloom. They were all standing outside the backdoor of the theater when Nat opened the telegram and read it out aloud; "You open Radio City Music Hall - stop - congratulations - stop - Knock them dead". **Nat;** "Duke yelled; "Whoopee", threw his cane up in the air, which was caught between two high wire telephone cables. We all looked up and watched the cane swinging back and forth. "Call the police" Duke screamed. The police suggested we call the fire department. Soon a fire engine pulled up, raised

a ladder and retrieved Duke's cane. The crowd dispersed, the fire engine left and Duke said; "Read that telegram again". Nat read it again and Duke yelled whoopee again and threw his cane in the air and landed in the wires again. We didn't bother to call anyone to retrieve it."



### **Cappy Barra Harmonica Ensemble**

They were awed by the grandeur and spaciousness of the Music Hall. Rehearsals were very early. On starting the rehearsal the conductor had a fit. "The harmonicas are not in tune!" he shouted. "I will not play for them, it sounds terrible!"

**Nat;** " Our harmonicas were tuned at 440, the Music Hall Orchestra was tuned at 442. After much hassling he finally agreed that the difference was so slight and that the musicians could squeeze their instruments and was no problem for the strings section. We did the Flight of the Bumble Bee in a shorter and more dynamic way and the ending was very abrupt, no big chord at the end. There was a dead silence from the audience at the finish. Harry, who was still fronting us, sort of panicked and shouted; "There you are!" and immediately there was a burst of thunderous applause that came at us in waves."

Erno Rappee rapped Harry over the knuckles because of his shouting; "There you are!". Rappee refused to let Harry front them anymore during their stay at the Music hall. They were held over at the Music Hall for four weeks. Harry no longer lead the group but being a very talented guy he got a job with Maury Amsterdam as a comedy writer.

Phil King however stayed with us all the way doing no comedy but appearing to be the best harmonica showman in the group to the audience, even though he couldn't play a note.

Duke and Nat became very close during this time. Duke took care of all the details, the bookings and calling various agents etc. During layoffs they would occasionally go up to the mountains where Duke new certain hotel owners, and were good for a free dinner and a room in return for a show by the group.

Ed Sullivan, columnist for the New York Daily News, loved their act. He had a tremendous love for show people and began to act as M.C. for various shows. He also started his Harvest Moon Ball dance contests at various vaudeville theatres, and took them with him as an act for closing the show after the winners were chosen from the contestants. The Grand Finale came when the nation wide winners danced, in various categories, at Madison Square Garden.

**Nat;** "He also used our group for entertainment at the Mr. America contest. This was the first time we had ever seen iron pumpers in action. We were invited to a party after the winner was declared, but we had other things on our mind."

Ed Sullivan sent them a telegram asking them to open at the Lowe State in New York; this was also with the Harvest Moon dance winners. Ed did a screen commentary on happenings in the past.

**Nat;** "Since were known for doing the Flight of the Bumblebee, Jack Benny came out on stage, he was always threatening to do the Bumble Bee on the violin, and said with his hands on the side of his face; "If they do that, I'll go down on my hands and knees and do a salaam". As soon as we had finished Jack went down and did a salaam. It got screams from the audience."

### **The Big Break**

From New York they went to Washington, then Baltimore. Eddy Arnold was on the bill with them. He always had a keg of beer in his dressing room and didn't mind sharing with them. He loved the act and kept telling them to head for California. He told them they'd be a smash there. Back to Washington, and from there they went to the Fox Theatre in Philadelphia. In the meantime Ripps had taken on a stage-name, as he wanted to become a movie star. Back to New York at the Foxy Theatre again for the umteenth time. Then the Mount Royal Hotel in Montreal. The act was getting more polished all the time and they came to a point where they needed to make the big jump or stay where they were forever.

**Nat;** "Duke and I decided that we would have our office to book us westwards and would then take the big gamble to go to California. At the Fox Theatre in Detroit we pooled our resources, bought two brand new 1938 Plymouth Deluxe model cars for the awesome price of \$750.00 each. That practically broke us and we headed for California. It was late September 1937 when we left for Hollywood. We pooled whatever money we had left and rationed it for food and the trip. We pulled into Denver at about six in the evening and checked into a third rate hotel where the rates were in line with our stringent budget.

That night the temperature had dropped to ten below zero. In the morning we had two brand new cars with busted blocks. They hadn't put anti-freeze in the cars. After getting the cars thawed out we found a mechanic who said he would try to weld the blocks, but he didn't guarantee that the weld would hold. After haggling over the price he did the job. Luckily both cars held out, as a matter of fact we put over 100.000 miles on each car without any trouble at all. That sold us on Chrysler products."

Duke had some friends in California where they stayed on the muscle. He began to make rounds but couldn't open any doors. Their money was running perilously low. Their Californian division of M.C.A. finally got them a few cheap club dates, but none of the Californian bookers wanted to take a chance on them.

**Nat;** "The big club at the time was the Trocadero on Sunset Strip. Duke finally convinced the booker to let us do a showcase there on a Saturday night. With the joint packed with every star in show business in the audience we did our thing. We were a smash. We played and played, back for encore after encore. Nothing on the bill that night could follow us. After the show I went to the men's room and a gentleman said to me in a very foreign language; "Dot vas a werry nice show". "denks werry much" I responded. He gave me his card and said; "Tomorrow you should

come to my office until we'll talk". I took the card and shoved it in my pocket. When we were back at the house celebrating our smash, I suddenly remembered the card and showed it to Duke. It read, Joe Pasternak, Producer Universal Studios. "Are you sure he told you to come to his office?" "His exact words" I replied."

The next morning they went to Mr. Pasternak's office. They all sat very quiet listening throughout the interview. Universal Pictures were going to make a second picture with Deanna Durbin. Her first movie "100 Men and a Girl" was a great hit and pulled Universal out of a virtual bankruptcy.

**Nat;** "We signed a contract that morning for twelve thousand dollars with a guarantee for two more pictures within a year's time, and gave us an option after the expiration of the first year guaranteeing us at least three spots a year for the next seven years. The picture was "Mad about Music" with Herbert Marshall, Gail Patrick, Arthur Treacher and of course Deanna Durbin."



**The Cappy Barras in "Mad about Music" 1938**

Deanna was the hottest property in Hollywood. The Cappy Barras stayed on the set for six weeks. Norman Taurog was the director and Arthur Prévin the musical director.

**Nat;** "We took two houses for our group in Whiteleigh Heights where we held open house for about three months. The money we received was a virtual fortune in those days. Lee and I bought horses and stabled them at a nearby ranch. We outfitted ourselves Western style, tooled leather boots and all. When the picture was released for a showing at the Orpheus Theatre in Los Angeles, we were featured on the bill along with Fats Waller and his band."

They were booked into a string of theatres where the picture was playing. Their money jumped dramatically as they were getting 1500 dollars for each theatre appearance. They were really on their way. They spent money like drunken sailors. As a matter of fact, they decided on their own, since they had some free time, to drive back to New York to try and book themselves into the New York World Fair. After their arrival their office informed them that they were booked into the San Francisco World Fair, which was running concurrently with the New York Fair. So they just turned around and headed back to California.

They got a call from Universal telling them that they were lending them out to Warner Bros,

Studios to make a picture called Pot O' Gold with James Stewart and Paulette Goddard with Horace Height's Band.

**Nat;** "There was a scene in the picture where James Stewart was in jail, I spent weeks with him teaching him how to hold the harmonica and then dubbed the actual playing."

After this they did some personal appearances. They did the Rudy Vallee Show, all radio of course. The Bing Crosby Show and the Chesterfield Show with Paul Whiteman.

**Nat;** "It was late 1941 when we were booked in a series of theatres across the country heading back to the East Coast. We had an offer from M.C.A. to go to Sidney Australia, opening 1 December. The fee 500 Australian pounds per week. In those days the pound had an equivalent of five US Dollars. The offer was with a guarantee of at least twenty consecutive weeks. Some of the guys were reluctant to go, it would mean canceling a part of the tour we were already booked for. We held a vote, the nay's won. Another reason some guys were reluctant was the political situation, the war going on between Japan and China and our own imminent involvement. We were at a theatre in Columbus, Ohio doing an early show when an M.P. officer interrupted us in the middle of our performance. He said; "All Army, Navy and Marine personnel, whether you are on furlough or away from your base for any reason, return immediately to your home base. All furloughs are cancelled. The Japanese have just bombed Pearl Harbor". Duke looked at all of us, huddled around a radio and said; "Where the Hell is Pearl Harbor?"

**Cappy Barra Members:**

**Nat Bergman - Don Ripps - Sam Scheckter - Phil Solomon - Leon LaFell - Joe Mullendore - Sam Sperling - Milton Freeman - Alan Greene - Pro Robbins - Eddie Shu - Charles Leighton – George Fields.**

**Non-playing members:**

**Phil King - Harry Morton - Henry Nemo - Maurice Duke.**

**Thanks to Duane Bergman**

**Art M. Daane.**

**Helmond, Netherlands 20 January 2003.**

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