

Memories of my Teacher, James Dutton Virtuoso Marimbist and Teacher

by Barbara Brabec



ABOVE: *The Concert Trio of James Dutton and Dianne Andrews on the King George Marimbas, with Dutton's wife, Harried French on piano. (Photos and bio copy below are adapted from one of Dutton's recital brochures from the late fifties from my marimba scrapbook.)*

JAMES DUTTON . . . Head of the Marimba department at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago (from 1945 to 1985) began studying music by the age of three. He first worked with woodwinds, then turned to the piano, and by the age of twelve had selected this ancient instrument, the marimba, as his metier. He played in recital throughout the United States and appeared as soloist with prominent symphonies. Dexterity, manual flexibility, expert musicianship and an unusual sense of interpretation are the requisites of a real artist—not just a performer. Paul Creston, the eminent American contemporary composer, said, “Mr. Dutton is one of the finest musicians I have heard, equipped with the highest technical proficiency and authoritative insight in his

interpretation of my ‘Concertino for Marimba.’”



HARRIET FRENCH, who in private life was Mrs. James Dutton, began her musical career at the age of four and progressed rapidly under such teachers as Mattie Anderson, Edwarda Metz, and Harold Van Home.



This teaching was climaxed with meticulous coaching under the eminent Rudolph Reuter. As a marimba accompanist, a highly specialized art, she was unquestionably the finest in the country. As a soloist, she was gifted with brilliant technique and musical perception. Her recitals and radio programs were acclaimed by critics and audiences alike.

* * *

VERY LITTLE CAN BE FOUND on the Web about James Dutton, and I found nothing at all about Harriet French or Dianne Andrews. In reading Dutton's memorial on the Percussive Arts Society pages (a link that has now gone bad), I was struck by the fact that, prior to beginning his career as a concert marimbist, he had studied marimba and vibes with [Clair Omar Musser](#) (marimba virtuoso; 1901-1998) and drums and timpani with Edward Metzenger (1902-1987), as did my late husband, Harry, and countless other professional percussionists of his era.

I was still in high school when James Dutton agreed to take me as a marimba student, and to say that he played an important role in my life would be understating the facts. He was not only a great help to me when I was struggling to play professionally in Chicago, but by introducing me to other percussionists, I eventually met the musician who would introduce me to the man I was destined to marry three weeks after we met.

When I first began to study with Dutton, I already had years of public performing under my belt, not as a trained musician, but merely a self-taught marimbist guided only by my high school's piano teacher, who had no skill in teaching mallets. As a student of the piano, I simply began to play the marimba the same way I played piano, with the two sticks in the left hand providing the bass and rhythm, and the two right-hand sticks providing the melody, with chords and rolls stuck in here and there. Since I played by ear and couldn't find the kind of music I wanted to play, I was soon making my own arrangements. Before long, I was entertaining at various school functions, providing background music, and entering amateur contests.

So by the time I connected with Dutton, I had acquired years of bad habits, technically speaking, and he was rather amused by "my style," to say the least. After I played a few tunes for him, he said I clearly had talent, but my technique was terrible, and I'd have to start all over again and unlearn years of bad habits and, of course, practice, practice, practice. Thanks to his encouragement and patience, I finally "broke into the business" in 1959. (See this article for a summary of [my brief career as a musical entertainer](#) in Chicago.)

SOME OF DUTTON'S STUDENTS in those days included Dwight Malcolm and Joan Wilson (who regularly performed together in concert), Gordon Peters, Tom Siwe, and Gene Martin. Every year that I was his student, Dutton invited all of us to a wonderful Memorial Day outing. We'd leave early in the morning, get out to Dutton's house for breakfast, and then drive to the forest preserve to go horseback riding. In a letter to my mother one year, I wrote:

"We all had to buy a rider's license before we could go—there were eleven of us this year. After our horseback ride we went to Miller's beach in Gary, Indiana. It was very hot by then, so before we ate, we all went for a swim in water that was like ice. Then Dutton took us out on the lake in his motor boat (he's like a little kid when it comes to that boat!), and later let some of the guys take the boat out without him. We had to wear our swim suits because we hit every wave head on and practically flooded the boat every time. We stayed at the beach till dark, then went back to the house for hot dogs and marshmallows roasted in the fireplace. It

was 11:30 by the time I got home. A wonderful day! Harriet, Dutton's wife, is a very sweet person who made all of us feel at home."

One fall after I started lessons again (no lessons during the summer), Dutton was quite surprised by what I had accomplished during the summer, but per his usual, he only grunted. I wrote mother saying:

"I think he's afraid to say very much to me for fear it will go to my head. But he did say I had made a 'couple of damn good arrangements' (I played *Moonlight in Vermont* and *Sophisticated Lady* for him), but then he tacked this remark on the end of his compliment: 'However, young lady, I'm afraid you're going to have to practice them a little bit.' I only played around this summer; now it's time to get back to arpeggios, scales, and all sorts of exercises!"

In short, Dutton could both encourage and criticize in the same breath, which I thought made him a great teacher. That, and the fact that he never once suggested that my dream of playing dinner music on the marimba in fancy dinner clubs and hotels couldn't be realized, unlike the agents I was speaking with at the time. In my memoir, [*The Drummer Drives! Everybody Else Rides*](#), one chapter of the book, "Divinely Connected by the Marimba," talks about the obstacles I faced as I tried to "break into the business" in the sixties and how the decisions I made at that time led me directly to Harry.

Dutton was always doing his best to stimulate us by exposing us to new things. I had no sooner become his student when he began to prepare me for my first recital. Later, he opened other "performing doors" for me. He also brought me into his percussion ensemble, and even into a choir he was directing at the time, which gave me my first opportunity to sing in public. One time he invited Jose Bethancourt to talk to his percussion ensemble, telling us that, besides being an expert in Latin American music, he was known for one thing in particular, and that was (to quote Dutton), 'He can play faster with his right hand than any of you kids can play with both hands, so listen to what he tells you.' Bethancourt gave us a wonderful show that night.

DUTTON HELPED HIS STUDENTS in personal ways, too. One day when I was talking about my desire to move more gracefully while performing, he suggested that I take a few ballet lessons, saying that would give me more poise and grace on stage. I did take a few lessons just to please him. I found ballet terribly boring but I came away from those few lessons with more grace and the ability to glide behind the instrument instead of just step from one end to the other as I performed.

When I finally got close to my dream of providing dinner music for supper clubs, Dutton was helpful in other ways. We discussed my repertoire, and he gave me advice on how to arrange the music, when to play what, what to wear, and just things in general. My later lessons with him were as much talk as play. Once when my lesson was his last for the day, I wrote to mother saying I had really gotten carried away in discussing with him the possibilities of my music future, adding, "Mr. Dutton walked me to the corner after my lesson, leaving me with 'Goodbye, dear, it's been charming.'"

Truth be known, I found Mr. Dutton charming as well. My marimba career may have been short-lived, but the memories related to it and my years as one of his students will always be fresh in my mind. I regret that there is so little on the Web today to remind today's marimba students of one of the best in the business. If you were a student of Dutton's, I'd love to reminisce with you about those days. You'll find me on the Web at BarbaraBrabec.com, where this article originates.

James Dutton died on December 18, 1999. After writing this post, I found a memorial to him found on the PAS website, but the link has now gone bad and I can't turn up that page again. After reading it, I found it curious that there was no mention of Dutton's wife surviving him or preceding him in death, so I'm thinking they may have divorced somewhere along the line. Recently I was happy to hear that a music friend of mine had seen her at a musical function, and I just hope she finds this tribute on my website some day.

Copyright © 2014 by Barbara Brabec