



“The furthest thing from my mind was being a professional musician”



Lenore Raphael

At the age of three, jazz pianist Lenore Raphael began her first love affair – with the piano. Now, in her 70th year and well-established on the international jazz scene, this Steinway Artist and native New Yorker's affair with the instrument is still going strong.

Everything began very simply when, as a young child, Raphael sat down at the piano and just started to play by ear. Formal lessons followed at the age of six. “My first teacher,” she recalls, “was in a music school and I forget what the name of it was and the name of my teacher, but I remember cheating because I couldn't read the notes and she didn't know it. I would ask her to play it for me and I would play it by ear. Then one day I started to cry. She had asked me what note she was playing and I told her I didn't know. After that, she taught me how to read.”

When Lenore was eight, her family moved to a new home in the Bronx, and there she met her second teacher, Beulah Eisenstadt. “She was a marvellous concert pianist and teacher who, lucky for me, just happened to live in the same building. We lived on the sixth floor and she lived on the fifth. She was to be my teacher until I was eighteen.”

Raphael's musical education continued with her attendance at New York City's prestigious Music and Art High School and then New York University, where she received a Bachelor's Degree in Music. At that time, she states, “the furthest thing from my mind was being a professional musician. I did not want a classical concert career.” But jazz came into her life when her brother, who was studying trumpet, brought home records by Clifford Brown. “I was about eleven or twelve and I started playing along with them, because I could and I liked not having to be glued to the notes.”

Jazz resounded in her and she began going to New York jazz clubs in the late 1950s and sneaking in. “Listening to trumpeter Maynard Ferguson, pianists Teddy Wilson, Lennie Tristano and, of course, Stan Kenton, and seeing them live – I just thought this was great stuff and I navigated into jazz because I could do it.”

Raphael married early and as she started raising a family her career consisted of teaching. But then



Above: Lenore Raphael with Howard Alden on the cover of their new CD *Loverly*

Below: Raphael enjoys a feeling of intimacy with her Steinway, praising its warmth, brightness and response



she discovered pianist Oscar Peterson, who would become one of her biggest idols, along with Bill Evans and Bud Powell. “I bought all of Oscar's albums and started playing along with them, practising five or six hours a day.”

Raphael started playing professionally in the early '80s, with various groups and solo. While playing an engagement at a club called Gregory's, a bass player suggested she take lessons from Mike Longo, Dizzy Gillespie's pianist for many years and his music director. Longo became Raphael's third teacher and, along with Barry Harris, helped her to develop her own distinctive style. She began leading her own group in 1989 and made her first recording in 1991.

To date, Raphael has recorded six studio albums and two live albums, all on her own label Swingin' Fox Records – doing her own producing and promotion. Her newest recording, titled *Loverly*, with jazz guitarist Howard Alden, was released in June, just after her 70th birthday.

She still follows a busy and varied performing schedule, playing at clubs and jazz festivals all over the United States and in Europe (including a sold out performance at Ronnie Scott's in London), hosts her own interview/performance internet radio show *Lenore Raphael's Jazz Spot* on purejazzradio.com, as well as playing concerts and conducting jazz workshops and clinics at All-Steinway Schools and for various Steinway Societies.

The piano that resides in the Raphaels' New York City apartment is a Steinway Model L, manufactured in 1931. “It is an extension of my fingers,” she says. “For me, Steinway pianos have the warmth and feeling of intimacy with the instrument that I love. I can express the emotions of the music and at the same time achieve the brightness that I enjoy playing and hearing in a jazz performance. Also, since I play a lot of fast runs, I like the keys to respond quickly.”

When asked what keeps her going with a performance and travel schedule that would daunt someone half her age, Raphael responds, “It's the music – I love playing the piano – and also the reactions to the music from my audiences.” ■

Marcia Hillman