

“Judy at Carnegie Hall”--Judy Garland (1961)

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Essay by Lorna Luft (guest post)*



Carnegie Hall, April 1961: Judy Garland, Lorna Luft, Joe Luft and Liza Minnelli

Carnegie Hall Memories

On April 23, 1961, a concert was held at New York’s legendary Carnegie Hall in New York. The sold-out audience of 3,165 people was filled with everyone from the guy next door to Broadway stars and Hollywood legends who had flown in just for the concert. The singer was my mother, Judy Garland, and the evening was subsequently called “the greatest night in showbiz history.”

The good news is: I was there.

The bad news is: I was eight and a half years old, and I don’t remember a great many details about that night.

You see, for me, at eight and a half years old, it was just my mom doing what she did for work--that is, appearing in front of a few thousand people and singing her heart out. That was normal for me and my little brother, Joe, and our older sister, Liza. I’d seen my mom perform many times before--on the tour leading up to Carnegie Hall and in concert halls and theaters before that. Some nights we were there with her, some nights we weren’t, but whenever we were, the reaction from the audience was always the same: standing ovations and applause that sometimes seemed never to end.

That night, however, something was different. For starters, there was my dress: remember, I was only eight years old, so to be given a beautiful white dress, white knee socks, and white shoes meant only one thing: whatever happened, I was not to get them dirty! I loved that dress, I loved those shoes, and I knew I was getting dressed up for something special.

Then there was the police escort. We arrived at Carnegie Hall with a police escort.

Do I actually remember that? Or do I feel like I remember that because people told me I arrived with a police escort? How do you forget something like a police escort?

But every family has its memories, and those memories are passed on to their children. The line between what we remember and what we were told becomes blurred. That's how every family's legends are born. But, in my family, the family legends are often show-biz legends.

Over the years, so many people have filled in my little-girl memories of Carnegie Hall with their own adult memories that it's hard to separate what I remember of that night from what other people have told me.

Everyone who was anyone in New York and on Broadway was there that night and many other celebrities had flown in from Los Angeles. They tell me that the hall seats sold out as soon as tickets went on sale, as did a return engagement on May 21st. They say that Julie Andrews rose out of her seat after my mother sang "Come Rain or Come Shine" and that everyone in the audience joined her. They say that Myrna Loy stood on her seat during the encores and shouted, "Go, baby go!"

"Don't you remember that?" they ask me. "Surely you must remember Myrna Loy standing on her seat!"

But when I tell people I don't remember, they seem disappointed--or they don't believe me. Surely, they say, you must remember seeing legendary stars like Lauren Bacall and Debbie Reynolds, Spencer Tracy and Henry Fonda, Carol Channing and Ethel Merman, Benny Goodman and Harold Arlen, Tony Perkins and Roddy McDowell, Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Betty Comden and Adolph Green, Gwen Verdon and Bob Fosse, and Richard Burton. How could you forget seeing Burton? Well, because...I was eight....

People have told me that at the end of the concert, Rock Hudson lifted Liza, Joe, and myself up onto the stage, one by one, to be with our mother. Don't you remember Rock Hudson doing that they ask? Well, maybe I do. Or maybe I remember that because people told me that's what he did but, years later, Rock Hudson told me he was sitting in the front row and it was the greatest performance and night he'd ever seen.

What I do remember, distinctly, is standing up on that stage, my mother's arms around me, seeing all those adults crowding at the lip of the stage, and thinking "Grown ups don't act like this. These people have lost their minds!"

I remember 3,000 grown-ups dressed in tuxedos and fancy cocktail dresses and the sound of the audience screaming my mother's name and trying to touch her. It was scary! I tried to hide behind my mother but she took my hand and led me out in front, with Liza and Joe. She wanted us all to take a bow, as she frequently did, and to know that what was coming from the audience was love, pure love, and that we shouldn't be afraid of it. She was always so proud of us.

Years later, I asked Mort Lindsey, who was my mother's music director, what was different about that night. Mort said there was something about the space we were in--the acoustics of Carnegie Hall and the history--that made it seem different, but more than that, it was the love from the audience that night that made it different. He said it was more like a revival meeting. From the moment he got onto the podium to start the overture, Mort said, "It felt like all the stars had just lined up."

To this very day, whenever I listen to the Carnegie Hall album, which I consider to be the greatest live recording ever made, a feeling of joy and pride washes over me and I say to myself "and I was there."

The morning after the concert, the phone never stopped ringing. There were people bustling in and out of our suite at the Stanhope, which was filled with flowers--more flowers than I had ever seen in one place at one time--and the baskets and bouquets kept arriving. My mother was sitting in the bedroom, surrounded by an enormous mountain of congratulatory telegrams. She brushed away a pile of them to make room for me on the bed and reached her arms out to me.

“Wasn’t that something?” she said, pulling me close. “Wasn’t that something?”

“Yes,” I replied, “it was.”

It really was.

Lorna Luft is a television, stage, and film actress, singer and author. She happens to be the daughter of Judy Garland.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.