



Barbara Brabec, Marimbist

Professional Performer and Entertainer (1956-1962)

With "[Memories of My Teacher,](#)" James Dutton, Virtuoso Marimbist

Originally published on TheDrummerDrives.com blog (now closed).
Updated in 2020 for republication on Barbara Brabec's World.

PRIOR TO BECOMING a professional writer, and before I met and married Harry Brabec, I had another life as a freelance musician in Chicago in the fifties and sixties. I was living at the Three Arts Club for girls at 1300 North Dearborn in Chicago when I launched my marimba career in 1956.



It was common in those days for rich society women on Chicago's North Shore to donate their used evening gowns and cocktail dresses to the girl's club, which housed many struggling artists, drama students, and young musicians and singers who needed clothes for performing, but could ill afford them.

The dress I'm wearing here was estimated to have cost about \$900, and I couldn't believe my luck when the front desk called me to say there was a dress waiting for me if I wanted it. It was yards and yards of pink skirts overlaid with sequin-covered pink lace, and wearing it made me feel like a princess.

AT RIGHT:

I had an attentive audience as I played background music for this private affair. Unlike the evening gown above, I could afford cocktail dresses like this, which was what I generally wore when performing.

My favorite was a red chiffon dress (see below right) that cost \$50, an outrageous price to me in 1956, but a dress I loved with a passion and still have packed away in my trunk of memories, along with my rhinestone high-heeled shoes.



FORMER BUCKLEY GIRL TO PRESENT RECITAL IN CHICAGO

Miss Barbara Ann Schaumburg, marimbist of Chicago will be featured in an hour long young artists recital at Lyon and Healy Concert Hall, 64 East Jackson Blvd., on March 10 at 7:30 o'clock.

An artist pupil of James Dutton, her accompanist is Miss Barbara Buettal.

Her program consists of:
Adagio Cantabile from Sonata No. 8 by Beethoven.

Mimatures Prelude Sarabande Scherzo by Matthes.

Etude C Op. 6 No. 10 by Musser.

Rondo by Mozart.

Tambourine, The Swan, Dance No. 4, Rhapsodic Fantasy (Based on the second Hungarian Rhapsody by Liszt) by Kreisler; Saint Saens, Kriem by Heifetz and Edwards.

Miss Schaumburg has during the past two years performed in various recitals sponsored by the American Conservatory of Music and has entertained at Great Lakes Naval Hospital Training Center. She has presented a solo recital at the Three Arts Club and won an audition for a tour by the National School Assemblies in 1956. She is a former member of the American Conservatory Chorus and the Latin American Ensemble.

She is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. William Schaumburg of Buckley and a graduate of Buckley-Loda High School where she was valedictorian of her graduating class.



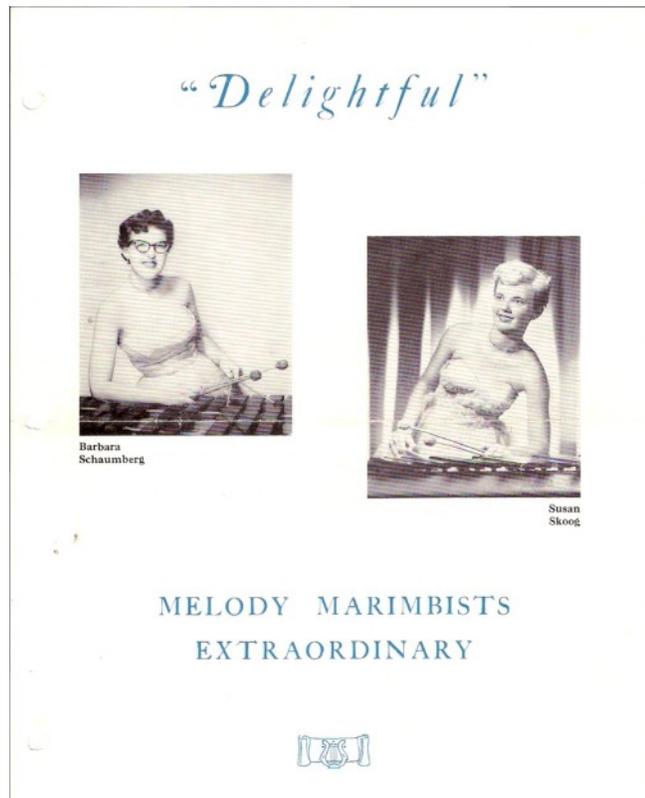
Re article at left: My home town of Buckley is a small farming community, and until I introduced the local citizenry to the marimba, they had never heard of the instrument. (Most called it a xylophone.) I began to perform in grade school just a few months after getting the marimba and was soon being asked to play for many local functions.

A YEAR AFTER COMING TO CHICAGO, I was chosen to be one of a group of musicians who would tour schools in several states for eight months. I was paired with another marimbist and we spent countless hours working on our act as the tour sponsors invested a considerable amount of time and money to promote our programs to schools.

Being so excited about this opportunity to perform, I was quite upset—and the tour sponsors were livid—when this girl suddenly decided to get married and backed out of the tour.

But this turned out to be a good thing for me, since I was then put directly on the path that would lead me to Harry Brabec, the man who would sweep me off my feet and lead me to the altar within three weeks.

(This story is told in my memoir and biography, [*The Drummer Drives! Everybody Else Rides—The Musical Life and Times of Harry Brabec, Legendary Chicago Symphony Percussionist and Humorist.*](#))



Soon after losing the tour opportunity, I quit my secretarial job, got contact lenses and a new hair style, and launched my new career as a marimba entertainer who was available to entertain at private parties, provide background music at wedding receptions and other events. My dream was to play dinner music in one of the fancy dining rooms of a Chicago hotel.



What I ended up doing the most of, however, was presenting programs for Women's Clubs in and around the Chicagoland area.

Below is the brochure I designed and included with all my typewritten correspondence (long before email and fax machines, of course).

Marimba

Original arrangements played with distinctive styling on a beautiful mellow-toned instrument.

Marimba...with a sprinkling of bells, maracas and Chinese cymbal... a unique combination!

MUSIC
by
Barbara



Opened, the inside looked like this, with slots cut so I could add my business card. I thought this was pretty nifty.



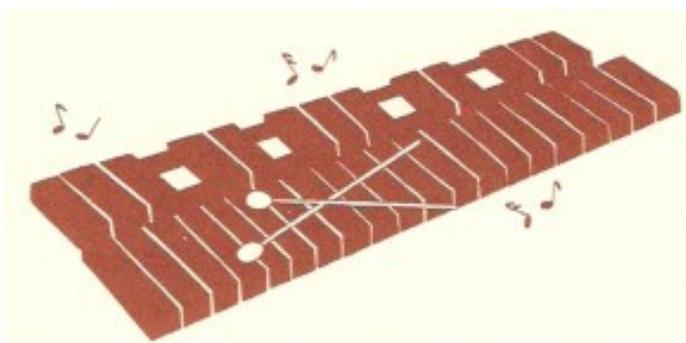
FROM:

WHITEHALL 4-6250

Barbara Schaumburg
MARIMBIST

DINNER MUSIC
A SPECIALTY

THREE ARTS CLUB
1300 N. DEARBORN PKWY.
CHICAGO 10, ILLINOIS



I used ivory stationery with this marimba graphic in the corner, and typed all my letters on a little electric portable typewriter. I was successful in getting a job in a supper club on Chicago's South Shore, and thrilled to finally have a chance to prove that marimba music made good dinner music.

But as I've discussed in my memoir about my life with Harry, there was a lot more to this kind of work than met the eye, and I ran into some surprising "brick walls" when it came to joining Chicago's Musicians Union.



I FELT LIKE A MILLION BUCKS when I wore this fancy white Borgana coat with its faux leopard hood/collar and cuffs to the Symphony, the Opera, the Shubert Theater, and every marimba job I played in the winter. As I recall, I paid about \$75 for it, which I considered an extravagant purchase at a time when \$40 was my limit for a regular winter coat. (We're always willing to pay more for a touch of glamour.)

Still in like-new condition, this rare vintage coat might bring a pretty penny on eBay today (I've never seen another one like it anywhere on the Web), but one of my sisters has always coveted this coat and would never forgive me if I sold it. Here in the Midwest, I have the weather for this kind of coat, but nowhere to wear it now.

Every once in a while I take it out of the closet, put it on, and remember the joys of my musical youth. When I look at this picture now, I wonder how on earth I managed to stand in those three-inch silver-heeled rhinestone shoes for three hours a night when I was playing at the Surf & Surrey. (The rhinestones were glued onto a wide strip of clear acrylic and I thought they were the most beautiful shoes I had ever seen.)

JOHN DINOU is your host at the Surf & Surrey, that distinguished dining place on the lake at 50th st. Continental cuisine has a place there in addition to standard items. Family dining is the feature every Sunday, starting with early brunch and continuing through the dinner hour, which actually is from 1 to 10 p.m. there. Musical entertainment is an added feature in the lounge with Ben "Rinkydink" White and his oldtime happytime music Tuesday through Saturday, and South Shore's own Barbara Schaumberg with her marimba melodies on Sunday and Monday nights.

I was upset when the ad below came out with my name spelled wrong (should have been SCHAUMBURG). But at least they got it right in the newspaper clipping at left, and my folks were proud of me.

PAGE 16 Wed., Sept 14, 1960 ECONOMIST NEWSPAPERS

Now It's Entertainment 7 Nites a Week!

- ★ BEN "Rinkydink" WHITE, Pianobar, Tues. thru Sat.
- ★ BARBARA SCHOENBERG, Marimba, Sun., Mon.

WEEKLY FASHION SHOW MONDAYS 1:30 P.M.
Morning, Night Time, Afternoons Too, It's The
Surf & Surrey With Delicious Food For You!
Reserve Now For All Holiday Parties!

OUR FAMOUS
F-L-A-M-I-N-G 325
SHISH-KEBAB

Prime Rib of Beef 3.75
Fried Chicken2.50

dinou's
SURF & SURREY
Restaurant & Pianobar
50th & South Shore Drive
MI. 3-4900 Ample Free Parking

Years later in one of my business books, I'd write about the benefits of publicity, saying I didn't care what they said about me so long as they spelled my name right.

Memories of my Teacher, James Dutton, Virtuoso Marimbist

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, Edward 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, who often performed with them. However, in 2019, James's son, Jim, contacted me after finding the first version of this story on my old website. In an email message he shared some of his memories about his dad (see end of document) and wrote this about Harriet: "During the 60s and 70s, Harriet was the choir pianist and church organist at Bethany Union church in Beverly Hills, Chicago. In the latter 70s and through the 80s she was the organist/pianist for at least two other churches in Chicago. At some point she was also a piano instructor at the University of Illinois Chicago Campus for several years. "

In reading Dutton's memorial on the Percussive Arts Society pages (link 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 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 musical 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 as a self-taught marimbist guided only by my own instincts and the school's piano teacher, who had no skills 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.

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 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 Mother, 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, and 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. (I've written about this period of my life in my memoir, *The Drummer Drives! Everybody Else Rides.*)

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 on 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. (Here's a [YouTube link](#) of him playing "Hora Staccato"—a tune all of Dutton's students had to learn—with the Xavier Cugat Orchestra in 1952.)

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 would love to hear from you.

2019 UPDATE: James Dutton died on December 18, 1999. I could find nothing about him on the Web when I first published this remembrance of him on my *Drummer Drives* blog in 2010, except for the PAS memorial which I can no longer find.

I did hear from one of his students and Dutton's second wife, Fran, in 2012, but I never got around to updating this story on the *DrummerDrives.com* blog before I decided to close it in 2014. Now I'm glad to tell the rest of his story here with additional information, especially since this may be the only place on the Web where information about James Dutton's life will be found on the Web.

I was grateful to hear from Fran Dutton, who called to give me the update I couldn't get anywhere else. She said she was very pleased with my comments about him and told me she had been studying with him the same time I was. She was just eight years old then, making him twenty years older than she was. She said that he and his first wife, Harriet, had five children, but that she and James, who were married for 34 years, had none. He died after ten years as an Alzheimer's patient, so her last years with him weren't so good, she said.

It was interesting to learn that she and James were involved in a music summer camp in Door County for many years. She has an education in Pharmacy and was still working in that field when we connected in 2012. I enjoyed our phone chat very much. We talked about age differences, our being ten and twenty years younger than our spouses, why neither of us ever wanted kids, and so on as though we were old friends. She offered to write an article that added to what I'd written, but she never got back to me, and I've now lost touch with her.

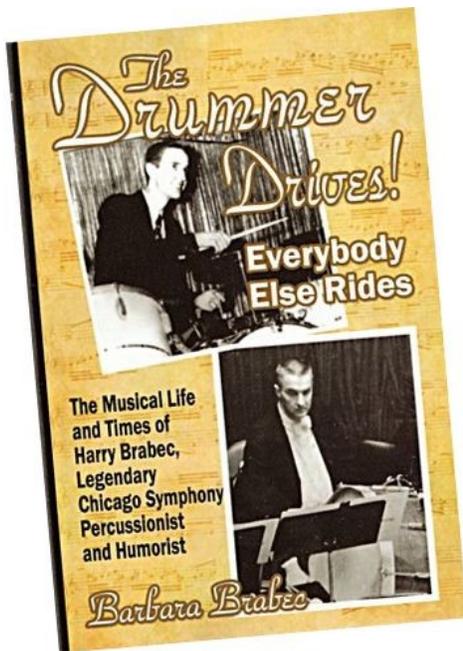
In December of 2012, one of Dutton's students, Wade Thames, said he felt compelled to write to me in response to my remembrances of him, saying:

"I used to work for Mr. Dutton during the late 70s to early 80s in Chicago. He had a music store called Percussion and Guitar Arts in the same building as the American Conservatory of Music in downtown Chicago where he taught percussion and music theory. I was one of the guitar instructors (private lessons) and I tutored some of the students at the American Conservatory of Music. When I was there his second wife was running his business. Mr. Dutton

eventually sold Percussion and Guitar Arts to the American Conservatory of Music. I worked there for about six more months before moving to California. I was about 23 at that time.

“Mr. Dutton was very good to me and I enjoyed the time I worked for him. I learned a lot about music from him and other teachers at the ACM. BTW, every time I hear a marimba I think of him!” [\[Back to Top\]](#)

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THE DRUMMER DRIVES! Everybody Else Rides is all about the musical life and times of Harry Brabec, legendary Chicago Symphony percussionist and humorist, and Barbara’s life with him as a wife, musician, co-business owner, and finally his widow. [Available on Amazon](#) in print and eBook editions.

Barbara’s complete musical story—how her selection of the marimba as her instrument of choice when she was in the sixth grade led her directly to Harry Brabec, and the lessons she learned as a freelance musician in Chicago in the sixties—is told in chapter three of the book, “Divinely Connected by the Marimba.”

Harry may be gone, but his legacy and the music of his life still lives on Barbara Brabec’s World. See [the book’s detail page](#), which links

to the Table of Contents, glowing reviews, and related articles with numerous stories and photos that could not be included in the book.

Your feedback to this writing is invited.

IF YOU’D LIKE TO comment on this writing or share your own marimba experience with me, I would love to hear from you. [Email me here](#). Be sure to include your phone number when you write, along with your time zone. I’d like to have the opportunity to call you if I want to continue the discussion.

Remember that this document may be freely shared with others as an email attachment. THANK YOU!



BARBARA LAUNCHED BarbaraBrabec.com in 2000 and quickly began to populate it with home-business articles and resources. Over the years she added hundreds of articles on several other topics related in one way or another to the larger topic of LIFE.

Now, LIFE itself is Barbara's focus. Unlike her original website, her new domain launched in 2021 features only her own writing—new content and an archive of timeless and relevant articles in fourteen life-related categories, all updated and reformatted for republication on the all-new "[Barbara Brabec's World.](#)" It reflects Barbara's current writing interests, latest books, and professional services.

Visit the [ARTICLES Table of Contents](#) to see article categories of possible interest to you and join her mailing list to receive her email *Brabec Bulletin* posts.

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