

Hermann Walecki's Hollywood Harp World

By Gregg Miner

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I never met Hermann Walecki, music store icon of 1930s-1960s Los Angeles – but I did get to know his son Fred, who eventually took over his famous store, Westwood Music. Fred was a stringed instrument nut who collected and dealt in rare vintage instruments. I first met him in the early 1990s when I brought in one of my early harp guitar finds to see if his then-repairman, the late luthier legend Rick Turner, would take it on (he did).

Over the years as I built up my home museum in our large back bedroom in Woodland Hills, California, both Rick and Fred – living legends themselves – would occasionally visit. [On one of those visits](#), Fred brought along some rarities from his father's vast files to share with me; they happened to be on the subject of *harps* – or harpists, as the case turned out to be. He kindly allowed me to borrow the photos to professionally scan them. I did so; one of them – in the center of my collage above – was so stunning that I had it professionally cleaned up of dust and scratches.

But *who was the harpist* in the photo? Was he the mysterious “Joseph Quintile” in the inscription? Fred had no idea; he had only found it among his father’s treasures from decades in the Hollywood music business. I’ll get back to the mystery photo later; first let’s take a quick look at Hermann himself. Here are some highlights pulled from Fred’s 2008 interview in *The Fretboard Journal* (with the editor’s kind permission):



FJ: Fred’s father, Hermann, came from Polish ancestry, was born in England and grew up in Canada. “My dad studied violin growing up on a small farm in Saskatoon, [Saskatchewan,]” Walecki recalls. The family business was making cabinets. “Dad apprenticed with *his* father and learned about wood finishes, gold leafing and French polishing. They built a lot of church furniture. You can still travel through the churches of that area and see altars and pews they made.”

FJ: As a young man, Hermann moved to Chicago and went to work selling instruments for Lyon & Healy. As a teenager, he had sent away for the Lyon & Healy catalogs, which featured beautiful color plates of rare Stradivarius and Guarneri violins, violas and cellos. With his photographic memory, Hermann memorized the history and word-for-word descriptions of every instrument. He impressed the Lyon & Healy hierarchy by demonstrating – in six European languages – that he knew their inventory better than they did, which gained him a position in the rare-violin department.

FJ: Hermann moved to Los Angeles in 1936 and established a branch of Lyon & Healy on Wilshire Boulevard. “My dad was an Old World intellectual,” says Walecki. “He knew many languages. He could engage people in a social way. Many string players from the movie-studio orchestras came to him. My dad would talk philosophy and poetry with the musicians while he repaired their violins and re-haired their bows.” A regular customer – and future golf partner – was Harpo Marx.

FJ: In 1947, Hermann Walecki opened his own store at 2085 Westwood Blvd. He stocked (and rented to students) only high-end instruments, and his store became known for quality. The one instrument he refused to carry was the steel-string guitar. “He didn’t want *that* element in the store,” his son says. “He never understood modern music, nor did he care to. He was consumed by classical music.”

FJ: Fred Walecki was born in 1946, and he grew up in a house filled with music, poetry and culture. His sister, Christine, was a cello prodigy who played with the National Symphony when she was 12. His older brother, Ronnie, had a mind for math and engineering.

FJ: Hermann died in 1967, and at the age of 18, Fred, then a student at Santa Monica City College, took over the store.



Left, from
The Atlantic

Back to me (GM): That quick glimpse above was simply too little. So, I was recently thrilled to discover that the September 2025 issue of *The Atlantic* features a wonderful and lengthy article by Fred Walecki’s daughter Nancy. In it, she warmly writes of additional Walecki lore and memories, including the store, her father hanging out with all the major Southern California rock stars his entire life, and grandfather Hermann. She recalled that the “Walecki track home nearby (the store) was decorated with harps and baroque instruments, and served as an artist’s salon of sorts: For a summer, the harpist Marcel Grandjany gave master classes in the living room and slept in the extra twin bed in Dad’s room (*just as Fred told me in Part 1!* - GM). When my father was born, his parents received a year-long diaper service as a gift from their friend Harpo – whom Hermann knew more as a harp player than a Marx Brother.”

There is much more in [Nancy's online article](#). Fred sold Westwood Music in 2010, and it closed forever during the pandemic. 78 years old as of this writing, Fred continues his vocation, doing repair work at his private Malibu shop. What a legacy!

Time to return now to Hermann. Fred's above story about the "Lyon & Healy branch" is fascinating to me, but I haven't been able to get any specifics about it from either Fred or Lyon & Healy. I once wrote L&H about their Los Angeles harp branch, and their scant remaining records only told them that "We had a store on Melrose in L.A., we believe from the late 50s through mid-70s. We changed ownership several times over the years and unfortunately do not have complete historical records."

Unfortunate, indeed. For I *know* that this wonderful previously-unpublished photograph below was taken in the Lyon & Healy Los Angeles showroom sometime in the mid-1940s.



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From the collection of the late L&H technician and harp restorer Dale Barco, it shows Lyon & Healy's L.A. "store manager Huntzinger" with harpist Mary Jane Barton and Harpo Marx (the inscription is Dale's, who of course knew all three people, and almost certainly Hermann as well).

Lyon & Healy would not confirm or expand on Huntzinger ("we do not give out employee records"), but did refer me to the American Harp Journal, Summer 2005: p.53:

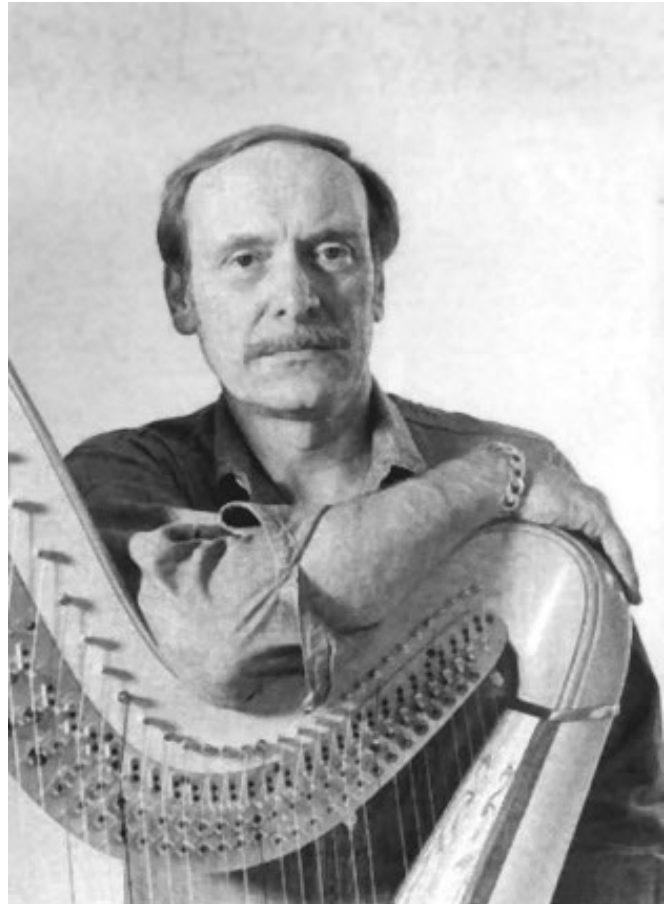
Mary Jane Barton had a long and successful career as a harpist; attended University of Southern California; graduated from the Curtis Institute; studied with Carlos Salzedo; contracted with both MGM and 20th Century Fox; featured harpist for such movies as "Victory at Sea" and "Sayonara"; featured as soloist under Fritz Reiner and Leopold Stokowski; toured with Roger Williams, Sauter and Finnegan, and Spike Jones; taught for many years in the Santa Barbara area; taught students such as Harpo Marx.

(GM: As for Harpo, of which I'm something of an insider expert, she *does* include that in her credits, though I find it rather suspect, or at least certainly highly embellished.)

From Dale's photo, I thus believe that the L.A. branch of L&H was definitely there before the late '50s, and – per Fred's interview above – quite possibly *developed directly out of* Hermann Walecki's L&H violin branch.

Over the years. meeting Hollywood musicians, whether from the studios or famous stars from stage and screen, became routine for Hermann. Other professional musicians who were traveling through made the stop as well. Oh, to have been a fly on the wall!

Here is Hermann's signed photo from his golf pal Harpo in 1939:



Above: Dale Barco, a friend and once my Woodland Hills neighbor, who was able to visit the Miner Museum before he passed away in 2018.



© Fred Walecki

And another from Marcel Grandjany, during his 1941 L.A. stop, when he slept in Fred's bedroom:



To my dear friend Hermann Walecki *Marcel Grandjany*
With all my heartiest greetings
Marcel Grandjany
Los Angeles. July 2, 1941

© Fred Walecki

And now to our *third* Walecki photo:



"Autumn"

Joseph Quintel

As I said earlier, Fred Walecki knew nothing about the photo's provenance. We don't know the date, setting, or the harpist pictured. After some research, I could only deduce that the photogenic old harpist is *not* Joseph Quintile – and unless someone out there recognizes him, he may remain forever anonymous. My guess is that Quintile took the photograph himself, titling and signing a print and giving it to his friend Herman Walecki as a gift. I don't think this is much of a leap – we can assume that Walecki and Quintile were surely acquainted, as the latter was Hollywood's MGM Studios orchestra harpist in the late 1940s and Walecki had a connection with both the Lyon & Healy store and seemingly every harpist in town. Despite my years in the American Harp Society's Los Angeles Chapter, I do not remember ever coming across Quintile's name, so I decided to do some background on him. (I *did* meet one of his students, Stella Castellucci, perhaps his most famous.)

Guiseppe – later, Joseph – Quintile was born November 25 1891 in the town of Marsicovetre, near the commune of Viggiano, still known today for its harp production, as Quintile himself describes here in a 1929 interview. Perhaps a more familiar harp name from the same region is Victor Salvi, whose father was originally from Viggiano.

Thus, Quintile was already a harpist when he emigrated to America in 1907. At some point, he was harpist for the St. Louis Symphony, which may have been his first assignment. His earliest solo appearance listed was in Wilmington, North Carolina in June of 1910. He spent the years 1918-1923 as harp professor at the Toronto Conservatory of Music, then settled in Cincinnati Ohio from at least 1924-1935.

JOSEPH QUINTILE was rocked in the "cradle of the harp." As a consequence he is harpist now with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra.

That cradle, the district of Monte Viggiano, in the Italian province of Potenza, supplies the world with most of its harpists. There are only about 3000 inhabitants in the cluster of little villages there, Quintile says, but harps are heard in every home.

"Our district is proud of the tradition that it produces the harpists of the world," Quintile says. "The interest in harps may have started from the old religious custom requiring bands of violinists and harpists to make yearly pilgrimages to the shrine of the Madonna del Monte Viggiano. The district manufactures its own harps, and since it is about 40 miles from any railroad, it is difficult to bring any other musical instrument thru the mountainous country."

Quintile lived in the village of Marsicovetre. All the members of his family played the harp. He learned to play first on a small instrument, somewhat like the Irish harp, when he was only five. Shortly after, his people moved to America, and he studied under Schuecker of Philadelphia.

Before coming to Cincinnati he played in the trio employed by Lady Eaton, wife of Sir John Eaton, at their Toronto home. He served also as professor of harp at the Toronto Conservatory of Music.

This is Quintile's seventh season with the Cincinnati orchestra. Two of his side activities are teaching at the College of Music and broadcasting every Tuesday night over WLW. Quintile's studio is at the Artists' Building, 35 E. Third-st.

Other famous harpists who are natives of Quintile's birthplace are Teodoro Cella of the New York Philharmonic, Pizzo of the New York Symphony Orchestra, Salvatore di Stefano, a solo harpist; Stefano di Stefano, of the National Broadcasting Company; Varello of the Chicago Opera Company, and Cortese of the Philadelphia Symphony.



This charcoal sketch of Joseph Quintile was drawn by Monya Karasik, fellow member of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. Below, Quintile at his harp.

From The Cincinnati Post, January 3 1929



From The Tampa Times, May 26 1939

Around 1938, he joined ex-Paul Whiteman's violinist Matty Malneck's swing octet, performing in films and on Broadway in *Very Warm for May* by Kern and Hammerstein II. His image in this May 1939 clipping is the last image of him I was able to find, but clearly demonstrates that he did not age into our weathered anonymous harpist.

In 1942, he transcribed the hilariously cartoony 1910 *Chicken Reel* for harp, including plucked "clucking sounds," which you can find online at various archives.

He spent his last years in Los Angeles playing jazz and classical in the MGM orchestra, with early 1950s horror film credits like *Creature from the Black Lagoon* and *It Came from Outer Space*. One of his last performances

was in 1956 with the Torrance Symphony. He died at age 68 on May 15 1960 in Redondo Beach, with his daughter Gelinda following in his footsteps as a Southern California harpist.

Perhaps all the information above is superfluous to my Walecki "photo essay," but I thought it might be nice to pay small tribute to a seemingly forgotten harpist, Joseph Quintile. Was he also then a *photography buff*? It seems to me that he *must* have taken the photo of the unnamed harpist in his cottage setting.

Was he a friend? A relative? (All the Quintile siblings played harp, remember.) I thought that perhaps his harp itself might help with our story. Not recognizing the model or maker, I asked early American harp expert Ian McVoy what he thought. He replied:

"I couldn't tell you with 100% certainty but I would be willing to bet that this harp is a Sweetland & Schimmeyer, or possibly *either* Sweetland or Schimmeyer – the two companies operated separately originally, then merged at some point. I'm not especially clear on the timeline but I'm eager to look into it soon as I recently bought a Sweetland. They built harps in Chicago in the early 1900s.



© Fred Walecki and Gregg Miner

"I've attached a photo of a Schimmeyer (below left) which looks like a somewhat cruder version of the harp in your photo as well as a photo of my Sweetland (right), which as you can see has nearly identical ornamentation on the base of the pillar."



I noted that Ian's two models were *double* action harps, whereas the harp in the Quintile photo is a single action. Whether Ian's two candidate makers made singles also is unknown. Inquiring further of expert Mike Baldwin, he replied "Looks like a single-action to me. I don't recognise the harp, nor maker. I'd guess it Eastern European, as the carving reminds me of Eastern European folk art."

I'm anxious to hear others' thoughts on the harp, the elderly gentleman, his environment, and any other interesting biographical material on Joseph Quintile.

And of course, *keep those Walecki stories coming!*



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