

## Maybelle Hassler Memories

My name is Maybelle Harriet Hassler and I was born in 1908 and I'll be 88 years old on May 23, 1996. I'm a Gemini on the cusp of Taurus. I've lead a very busy and interesting life and I've been threatening to write my life story. I never kept any scrap books but I should have because now my memory is like a sieve.

We lived in Joplin, Missouri in those days. My mother married a miner and he couldn't find any work. They divorced when I was 14. He was a drinker and he put mother out in the snow. Buddy and Bill and I were put in an orphanage when I was three. When I was six, my oldest brother Jerry climbed up a coal chute and ran away but Bill stayed to take care of Buddy and me—there was only 18 months difference between Buddy and me. So my father came and took us out of the orphanage to Joplin where my mother was working selling tea and coffee and he dumped us on her rooming house steps. My mama came home and asked, "What are you kids doing here?" Bill said, "Well, papa brought us here."

She took us to an orphanage in Joplin. She was no more than gone when we were right behind her. I had hold of Bill's hand and he had hold of Buddy's hand and we were going like the devil. We got back to the rooming house and mama said, "What am I going to do with you kids?" Bill said, "Mama, we're not going to be in any more orphanages. "So she sent me to my aunt in St. Louis and kept Buddy and put Bill in the boys' school. So from the time I was six years old till I was 12 or 14, I was shifted back and forth from my aunt to my mother and from my mother to my aunt. It was a hectic life but I didn't know any different so it didn't hurt me any. I was taught to take care of myself.

I started dancing when I was 14 or 15. Charleston was my professional name. I won a Charleston contest and was supposed to get a year's tuition in dancing and a job. Well, I got the job—all I did was parade and stand up on the high steps in the big costumes. I had to dance to make some money to pay the bills. This fellow, Bob Alton, who hired me couldn't remember my real name so he called me "Charleston". Some people still call me that to this day. I get letters that start out "Dear Charlie . . ." Charleston Crowder Hassler. Mom got me married when I was 15 to a traveling salesman, but the marriage got annulled.

I kept dancing—I had to—I had to make some money. I worked carnivals on the road, too. This agent used to call on me because I could do MC work and dance in the nightclubs, do comedy, and everything. I used to do soft shoe and high kicks. Now I dance in a group for the senior citizens—now, if I get my leg up even with my waist, I'm lucky.

I worked at the Avalon and the Del Mar in St. Louis. I danced at the Midnight Frolics, Colosimos and the Chez Paree in Chicago. I did club dates for three dollars a night. I would MC the show and dance in the chorus and I'd meet myself coming and going, changing costumes and all.

I met Bud at the Shenandoah Theater in St. Louis when I was age 15. He was playing

there. He was a patient man—he waited for me for five years till I grew up. I was working in Chicago and came home to St. Louis on vacation. At the time, I was engaged to a newspaper guy in Chicago, George Strickler who worked at the Chicago Tribune as a sportswriter. But I remembered Bud from before and I said to this friend of mine, "I wonder if Bud Hassler is still around." He said "He's working out on Washington Blvd." So I called and he was rehearsing down at the Ambassador Hotel. I called him there and he said, "Oh, Charleston, gee, good to hear from you. Come have dinner with me" and I said sure. I was 24 then.

I had knit myself an orange dress, trimmed in brown, no back. I went down there and we had dinner and Bud's eyes were like saucers. After dinner we were walking down the street and this gal was looking back at me and I turned around to her and said, "Gee, do you like what you see?" She turned as red as fire. I say she had no business staring at me. I'm a jerk—I say what I think. If people don't like me for what I am, they're the loser.

I fell in love with Bud. Do you know what made me fall in love with him? My mother had one of those upright pianos and he was sitting at that piano. His shoes were shined and his trousers were all pressed and creased so nice and I looked at him and I fell in love with him. Isn't that funny—I just fell for him.

We got married at 2 o'clock in the morning. It was 1933 and Bud worked in the Gary Theatre in St. Louis one week a month. I had gone down to wait for him after rehearsals. Judge Reideberger was the orchestra leader and he asked Bud, "When are you and Charleston going to get married?" Bud said, "Tonight if you'll marry us for nothing." The judge said fine. So one of the musicians drove me home to get my green silk suit that I had brought from Chicago. I told my mother that Bud and I were going to get married. She said, "You're both a couple of damned fools" I said, "Look, I'm the one who is going to marry him—nobody else."

The judge married us in Venice in the jail. On the way out of there one of the musicians was going to put me in the jail and lock me up so Bud couldn't get to me. but Bud said, "Oh, no, you don't!" and he grabbed me. We got back to the house that morning and Bud put our marriage license up on the stove so everyone would be sure to see it. My mother and dad were in Chicago at the World's Fair and God forbid they would catch us in bed. I slept in a teddy bear. I was just lucky I had that on.

Bud was a genius at music. He started playing instruments when he was four years old. He was studying to be a lawyer but the music took over. He played ten instruments and taught 15. He played in the symphony. He played on Sunset Blvd. in Los Angeles, and the Mocambo and Ciro's. He played in a taxi dance hall and the Grand Avenue Ballroom. He played with Bix Beiderbecke long before I knew him. They played in bands together and were very good friends. They worked on day boats out of St. Louis—he worked on a cruise boat going to South America.

I have a picture of him in Havana. He'd been drinking beer. He loved beer but he had to quit drinking later on because he was a borderline diabetic. He was wonderful man. I still

miss him every day. He died in 1977 of prostate cancer. He wouldn't quit teaching when he found out and he waited too long. He loved kids. We wanted kids in the world's worst way. I loved kids, too. He used to say, "Well, toots, we rehearsed but we never got the show on the road."

I was very fortunate to be in that family. I learned so much from Bud—before him, it was "deeze, dem and doze" with me. I didn't have much education but he had a lot of patience with me. How I got in that family I'll never know—you know, they were all eggheads. Joe played piano and was a professor of higher math. Bob had a medical degree and owned a pharmacy. Carl Marx Hassler could add up six columns at one time. Bud's mother was a school teacher and his dad was a doctor and Carl was a mental giant and Bud was an artist. I think some of his family didn't like me because I was just a little chorus girl—I was a nobody. They didn't like me because I didn't have brains-one. But his mother and dad were the only ones that were good to me. Mildred and Gerald were very nice—I still talk to Mildred. There is a garden at UCLA named after her. We call her the Jungle Queen.

Anyway, the darndest things happened in those old days. One night we were working at the St. Louis Country Club at a club date and I was dancing in the show. All the acts were back there shooting craps. I was drinking Scotch and water and I'm not a drinker. After one or two of those and I don't know if it's raining or Tuesday. Well, I don't know what I started with, but about six in the morning I said, "Let's go." I had more than \$200 in my jacket pocket. I came home and Bud was sound asleep. I woke him up and said, "Bud, look what I have" and I had it all fanned out. He looked up and said, "Gee, that's a lot of lettuce ( he pronounced it "leh-too-sie") why don't your go back and get some more?" Then he went back to sleep. We were able to pay our rent, my mother's rent, we paid some other bills and bought food for all of us. That was a lot of money back then.

I got mad at Bud once. We were playing bridge—Bud was a shark at bridge—he played contract and all that. Playing bridge, I made a stupid mistake and Bud bawled me out—he rarely ever talked "stern" to me. So I got mad and packed my clothes and put them in the Ford. He had asked me before if I wanted a diamond ring or a car. I said, "Get a car so we can both drive it." I couldn't see any use to getting a diamond ring. So he got a Model-T Ford with a rumble seat. I used to drive all the chorus girls in the rumble seat.

Anyway, I asked, "Do you need the Ford?" He said he didn't, so I went home to mama. About a week or so later Bud came over and asked, "May I use the car?" I said, "Sure, it's as much yours as it is mine". He had a club date. Then right after that we moved in with my mother. We stayed there till we got our first apartment, which was a little kitchen, a living room, bathroom and sink on Compton in St. Louis. I worked at the Missouri Theater, The Ambassador.

Another funny thing in my life. Al Capone used to come into the Midnight Follies in Chicago and he always had the chorus girls sitting at his table and he always wanted us to have something to drink, but God forbid you ask for a sandwich. So we're sitting there, having a drink in between shows. They had what they called "table singers", two guys

and a gal. They have a piano on wheels and they moved it around. They made money singing songs. There is nothing like that now—but we used to sit up on the balcony and put on an apron over our underwear and sit up there we could watch them. Al always sat with his back to the wall and he had all his henchmen around him and there'd be another henchman over at another table across the dance floor. So one night I'm sitting at Al's table and one of the guys he didn't like he put a Mickey Finn in his drink. You know what a Mickey Finn is—it's not a knockout drink, it's a horse physic. Two of the girls took a sip out of it and before you know it, it started working on them. We only had one toilet down in the dressing room and that was a sight. One was standing, holding her rear end like this and the other was on the throne and she couldn't get out and the other one was "Hurry up", with both ends going at the same time. I didn't have any of that drink, and, Honey, I was the only one that would stay there and take care of the girls. All this time I felt sorry for the girls but I was hysterical with laughter.

At the time, we had three shows a night (11:30, 2 and 4) and in between shows we'd sit tables. I'd been sitting at Al's table but George my fiancée came and I went over and sat with him. After the last show I went over and said, "Mr. Capone, thank you very much for the drinks, but my fiancée is here and I'm going home with him." "You're not going anywhere," he said. "I said, "Oh, yes, I am. I'm engaged to be married." He said, "You're not marring anybody I'm not going to let you go until you do get married." As God is my judge, I said, "Well, I'm sorry but I'm going home with him. "But I finally took George over to Al's table and said, "Mr. Capone, I'd like you to meet my fiancée, George Strickler." Al looked at him and said, brusquely, "How do you do," and he turned his back and his face turned red as fire. George said, "Let's get the hell out of here!" and I agreed.

So we walked back over to where Flower Mary was—she was a big, fat Jewish lady who had a flower stand—and I'm waiting for my roommate Jackie, who finally came out and we were standing there and Al walked over to Flower Mary and got a little bouquet and walked back and he took it and threw it at me but he missed me and hit Jackie. George said "Let's get OUT of here." We called a cab and left. So the next night Al came into the club and he was watching me dance—we had a semi-circle stage. Al kept motioning to me but I acted like I didn't see him, but I could see him out of the corner of my eye, and finally he said, "Come over here" I said "I will not!" and he said, "You're full of s-h-i-t." I said you're full of it, too." I went up on the balcony after the show and he'd keep motioning to me to come over but I still acted like I didn't see him and pretty soon he bought all of us chorus girls champagne.

He used to have the biggest parties at his hotel, the Lexington Hotel on 22nd and Wabash, right underneath the EL and it was a very exciting life. During Prohibition you could get the booze there because Al had a little bar that looked like a cloakroom. One night after the show, I was going to go out to play golf with one of the musicians but I had left my golf bag in the cloakroom I went in there to get my golf bag and Bottles Capone, who was Al's brother, asked, "Are you going to the hotel with me this morning?" I said, "No, I'm not." He said, "You're going to go to the hotel and go to bed with me. I said, "No, I'm not." He socked me in the face and I started to reach back

to get a golf club but I said to myself, "Oh, no," cause they'd have killed me. I walked into the maitre de and said, "Who in the hell does that guy think he is!!" He said, "Oh, he does that to all the girls."

Gwen Sweeny was crazy about one of the gangsters so after the show one night he invited us into this little bar to have a drink. Later we left in a cab together because Gwen lived just a few blocks from me. In the cab, she started calling me all kinds of names. So I got her around the neck and started slugging and slapping her til her face was bruised and she had a black eye. When she got to work that night one of the girls asked her, "My gosh, Gwen, what happened to you?" She said, "Oh, Charleston beat hell out of me in a cab because I called her names. I don't blame her for getting mad but she didn't have to beat me up.

That night Sadie the wardrobe mistress went in and told our boss Ralph that we had been fighting. Ralph had said before that the next time I had a fight in the dressing room, I'd be fired. Ralph called me in the office and said, "Charleston, I told you the next time you had a fight in the dressing room you'd be fired." I said that I didn't have a fight in the dressing room—it was in a taxi." He said, "Get your ass back to work."

When I first started there at the Midnight Follies, I was a milktoast. They'd say, "Charleston, bring me this , bring me that." Food, sandwiches, or anything during a break between rehearsals or matinees. They never thanked me or told me to go to hell, so I learned after that never to take anything from anyone—and I still don't.

One year I worked in Reno doing comedy at the Doll House and one night they all wanted to go up in the mountains for a deer hunt. So all the acts and the chorus girls and the crap tables shills all went up there and important magazine people were up there taking pictures. They had gone down to Reno and gotten frozen deer and brought it up and built a great big fire and we're all sitting around it. We left there around 7 in the morning to go home and to get some sleep.

That night we went to work and I was sitting at the bar with the card girl. She was the slowest-moving broad you ever knew in your life. She was from the South. It took her an hour and a half to say what a card had done. Then they brought in this live jackass and they faced him to the bar and his tail was toward the Black Jack tables. They were feeding him beer and all of sudden the jackass raised his tail and all hell broke loose. I never saw anybody move so fast in my life as that hostess. I was so hysterical I couldn't stop laughing. I was pounding the table at the bar. I was laughing so hard I couldn't get away from the bar so finally I went back to the dressing room and this act in the dressing room asked what was going on out there. Well, I started to tell her and that was it. I was all gone again.

I went on stage doing my comedy act and just in the middle if it they brought the jackass into the dining room and the same thing happened . You never saw people move so fast in your life.

We moved to Hollywood, Calif. in 1941. Uncle Bob, Carl and Gerald were out here—most of them lived in Altadena. I had to keep dancing because Bud had to be in Los Angeles six months before he could work—it was a union thing, so I did club dates. I'd bring the money home and hand it to Bud so we could pay bills and buy food. I still dance—I have a rehearsal tomorrow, we do regular musicals.

I had my eyes operated on because I couldn't see because of cataracts and a hole back of the retina. I can't see as well now with the cataracts out as when they were in. I'm going back to another doctor. I have some mementoes but since the earthquake, all these things fell out onto the floor and I just put them up helter-skelter. I need a lawyer. My chimney fell down and I had to have it knocked down. They bid \$3,000 plus another \$3,000 for painting and it's now up to \$16,000. My insurance only pays \$4,000. They've screwed me without a kiss. There are some lawyers who have moved two doors from me. They have all the information and are going to see about it.

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