

# A Rose is Still a Rose in 2009

A TRIBUTE TO ROSA RIO BY DONNA PARKER, LEW WILLIAMS, AND TERRY SNYDER

Can you guess what these headlines have in common?

- The first public demonstration of radio
- Denmark sells Virgin Islands to the US
- Schönberg's "Verklarte Nacht" premieres in Vienna
- J. C. Penney opens his first store
- President Teddy Roosevelt became first US chief executive to ride in an automobile

The answer is they all happened in 1902, the same year an extraordinary lady was born—Ms. Rosa Rio.

Rosa Rio celebrated her 106th birthday on June 2, 2008. To honor the occasion, several friends including Lew Williams, Bobbi Williams (Lew's sister), and Terry Snyder converged from different corners of the United States to spend the day with Rosa and her husband, Bill Yeoman, in their lovely home in Sun City Center, Florida. Ms. Rio greeted her guests at the door in her typical vibrant, beautiful, and exuberant way. Full of smiles and hugs, she began answering the endless rounds of questions about her prominent career and famous colleagues. And what an amazing trip down memory lane this was indeed.

Rosa attributes her longevity to a balance between the emotional, spiritual, and physical aspects of her life. At almost 107 today, no one is arguing with her unquestionable success. That day, Rosa revealed her zest for life with those remarkable, flashing, brown eyes and an amazing recall for the names, dates, places, and events that shaped her career for the last 80 or 90 years.

Ms. Rio recounted humorous anecdotes of practical jokes played upon her—as well as delivered by her—while live on the radio. As long as her music went on flawlessly, like it always did, or the announcer with whom she worked kept his voice at an even keel, no one listening to the show was aware of the high jinks and shenanigans going on behind the scenes.

One memorable incident took place in the NBC studios during the heyday of radio, when a fellow staff member unfastened the buttons down the back of her blouse, then rolled her stockings down around her ankles while she continued to play live on the air. The stakes were high, as no mistakes would be tolerated during a

broadcast. This was to the amusement of the entire studio staff, and Rosa took it in unflappable stride. The story didn't end there. She evened up the score by unzipping the pants of that prankster and pulling his shirttail through the opening—again while he was live on-air and within full view of the 'off microphone' staff. Rosa could take it and dish it out! Rosa learned how to joke with an all-male staff, speak their language, and hand it right back. Without that, she never would have made it in the business. Her strength was recognized, which made her a valuable team member.

This spirited lady was highly regarded and sought after by theatre management and her musical contemporaries. Never trying to overshadow the orchestra or be "the star" or a stand-out, she figured out at an early age how to support them and make them sound successful. Rosa was called on to accompany singers, play with orchestras, and perform solo organ concerts. Rosa even had her own radio show, *Rosa Rio Rhythms*, broadcast on NBC radio in New York City. Colleagues relied on her to substitute for them when they needed to be away. They knew Rosa would never try to take their job, or "do them dirt," as she would say. There was an honorable way to act and do business. She was exemplary.

Stories of Mary Martin, Orson Welles, Richard Rodgers, Bing Crosby, the Gershwin family, Irving Berlin, and Victor Borge held everyone's rapt attention. Rosa's remembrances included non-musicians like Eleanor Roosevelt and premiere theatre organists including Ashley Miller, Dick Leibert, and George Wright. Sharing these stories at her birthday celebration made history come alive. The famous characters and details painted vivid pictures in the guests' eyes. It is agreed that these experiences comprise the makings of a powerful book and fascinating read.

The stories flowed like beautiful music. In the middle of one of the stories about playing theme songs and accompaniments for the soaps, Rosa said, "Here, let me show you on the piano." She seated herself at her 9' Baldwin concert grand that formerly belonged to José Itubi. After demonstrating the passage of which she was speaking, guests would not allow her to stop. To everyone's delight, she began playing and then improvising. A magical hush fell as

her still nimble fingers and quick-thinking mind intertwined runs, scales, and classical passages into popular Gershwin melodies with a polish and ease of yesteryear. Again her guests were spellbound by a most enchanting, elegant performance by a master musician and remarkable lady.

It is a true accomplishment to have enjoyed a spectacular career brimming with musical legends and landmark events—a career that has successfully spanned many art forms, including silent films, radio, television, teaching and accompanying Broadway's finest. Ms. Rio lived that accomplishment with great respect from colleagues. She demonstrated humility and joy for life itself. Then being able to reflect upon it all with wonderful clarity and splendid health at almost 107 years of age...well, that is the ultimate definition of true success on all levels.

When asked about working beside all the famous people of the day, she said they were all just doing their jobs. When pushed a little harder about the issue of working in all the big theatres in New York City and with the biggest celebrities and most prominent people, she said modestly, "Yes, I drank from the cup." That quote tells it all.



Rosa Rio (Photo by Bob Smith)