

# CMSA Founder Norman Levine

by Bruce Graybill

Norman Levine was born in 1930. He was the son of Charles and Nina Levine and lived in a Brooklyn, N.Y. neighborhood called Bensonhurst, in those formative years. He attended a Yiddish (shuleh) school after public school let out each day at 3 pm, and like many boys his age, enjoyed playing punchball and stickball in the streets. He was introduced to the mandolin at age nine. Norman was given a good example of people who will do work for the benefit of others, at barely poverty level wages, by a teacher at his shuleh named Lehrer Silverberg. Norman credits this teacher with showing him the importance of working for the benefit of others. That philosophy translated into a lifetime of self-sacrifice in the name of mandolin.

Norman's first mandolin was a Stradolin, sold to his parents by a mandolin teacher by the name of Cooper. For \$10 they got the Stradolin, a brown cloth case, a music stand, a beginner's lesson book and a music-writing pad. Mr. Cooper, who was a student of Luigi Paparello, gave group lessons at the shuleh. The lessons cost his parents 25 cents per week. After a few months of classes, Norman found himself the lone student left from those who started with him. He tried guitar for a short time after, but was never as interested as he had been in mandolin. It is interesting to note that Norman always felt that he needed to take mandolin lessons only from the best of available teachers. Anything less would seem senseless.

Around the time of his mandolin class dissolving, Norman became aware of an organization called the Workingman's Circle, which was a mostly-Jewish fraternal organization with tens of thousands of members. Although primarily focused on labor relations activities and political movements, the organization also supported many cultural activities, among them a mandolin orchestra and a strong musical program. It was at a concert of this Mandolin Orchestra that Norman first saw a performance by mandolinist Homo Freierman, who later became known as the great gypsy mandolinist Howard Frye. The impression left on Norman was enough to make him want to study mandolin again.

Norman began taking lesson from Luigi Paparello on Coney Island not long after that. He had to travel by subway and bus to do so. Those lessons continued for years and eventually moved to Manhattan. Norman continued to grow as a mandolin player and eventually became friends with Freierman, and in the years after Freierman's marriage with Beverly Levine (no relation to Norman), he babysat their children. Later he would become manager for Freierman, now known as Howard

Frye, and make many sacrifices to help with Frye's career as a classical mandolinist.

Norman got a job in Paris in 1967 working on a magazine called French Prevention. In December of that year, Howard passed away. The effect on Norman was profound in many ways. His friend and mentor were gone, and with him came a distinct lessening of the importance of classical mandolin to American audiences. These events, and the effects on our society would become the fertilizer for the seeds of a mandolin music publishing business for Norman some 15 years later. He felt he owed it to his two biggest mentors: Luigi Paparello and Howard Frye.

In 1980 Norman once again took a European job position, this time in Brussels Belgium. He had continued to play mandolin; often feeling it was as lost in Europe as it was in America until one day in 1981 when he saw a television program that featured a mandolin orchestra from Malmedy, Belgium. Norman spent some time researching the organization, and eventually made contact with a non-playing conductor of that mandolin orchestra, Alain Collard, who told him of an Australian mandolinist Keith Harris. Harris, a mandolinist and teacher of highest acclaim would soon be in Germany to give a weekend of lessons. This was an opportunity Norman would not miss. Keith and Norman became friends in short order and Harris introduced him to a large Mandolin community in Germany. Norman started imagining what could be done in America to rekindle the fires of mandolin interest here. The two figures in his past, which he described as 'digging into my shoulders', spurred him further towards doing something good for mandolin.

Norman came back to the United States for a short time in 1982 for a vacation. During this trip he met Neil Gladd, who he met through a friend of a friend, and agreed to publish three of Neil's works. This made Norman the first full time American publisher of classical mandolin works in many decades. That same year he met the Mair-Davis Duo and Berkeley Mandolin Ensemble in Sweden. Norman attended several classes being given to the local Swedish orchestra by Marilyn, in preparation for a two LP recording. Watching Marilyn teach, Norman was soon convinced that there was hope for Mandolin in America.

Not long after that Norman attended his first Zupfmusik Festival in Germany and sold his music publications as a vendor. The event rekindled his desire for a similar festival in the USA. During a

*(Continued on page 5)*

# CMSA Founder Norman Levine

*(Continued from page 4)*

gathering of Americans at that festival, Norman suggested they meet together at home in the states. Mair-Davis organized one at their home in Providence, Rhode Island, the following summer.

In 1984 Norman issued a classical mandolin LP from tapes of Howard Frye recorded in the 1950s and 1960s. He returned to the USA from his work in Europe and moved to the Washington D.C. area. He couldn't get the German mandolin experience out of his mind. He truly believed America would benefit from an organized classical mandolin society. When he was attending the Zupfmusik Festival, he had sold more mandolin works in Germany in a few days than he sold in several years of trying here.

It was around this time that Norman realized his mandolin playing time could be more productively spent supporting mandolin in other ways through publishing and promotion. It is a decision he later said he regretted, but felt it a necessary sacrifice for the good of mandolin. He hoped that someday after his retirement (in his 90s, as he put it), he would play again.

Norman brought Keith Harris to America to teach in the mid 1980s, and soon after the Mair-Davis Duo started their Mandolin and Guitar Summer School, which is still in existence today. His excitement grew and he longed for more. He felt that teaching was the most important need, if American mandolin were to survive, much less flourish. There were few teachers, and they were spread out far across the country from each other. Norman thought if he could just get the mandolinists together, the rest would work itself out.

In 1986 Norman founded the Classical Mandolin Society of American Inc. In his foresight he set it up as a non-profit 501(3)(C) corporation with Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws that would protect its altruistic cultural purpose. He was chided by some and told he would get no more than 25 members, half would quit the first year, and the organization would be forced to fold. He aimed at getting 100 members the first year and got 125. The organization would continue to grow into the CMSA we know today.

Not being one to rest on his accomplishments, Norman went on to form Plucked String Foundation Inc., a non-profit fundraising group for mostly mandolin activities, and he started 'Mandolin Quarterly,' a magazine that addressed Classical Mandolin with the emphasis he felt so important. Norman told me many times in his last few years, it is not necessarily about having to be classical music; it is about the method of teaching. If

one learns to play with classical mandolin teaching being incorporated, they will be able to play anything.

In 1989 Norman was diagnosed with a rare cancer. After many doctors, treatments, chemotherapy and help, that included a doctor with the National Institute of Health (Bob Hammond, who is also a mandolinist), Norman would seemingly be given a reprieve from what first looked like an end to an all too short life.

It was around this time that I first talked to Norman Levine over the phone. I was referred to Plucked String Inc. as a place where I could find mandolin music. It would be another five years or so before I first met him in person at the CMSA convention in Providence, Rhode Island. I had to remind him that I was the guy he had to send a bill to twice to get paid. From that moment on, Norman never ceased to find a way to get my attention if he needed to! His dry Brooklyn sarcasm could cut through most any social fabric, and his drive could accomplish most anything he set his mind to.

Norman went on to publish many more mandolin works, and managed Duo Capriccioso for several years, and released CDs of American mandolinists. He even wrote a book on Howard Frye in his later years. The title of the book was quite telling. In large print it reads "Howard Frye and," and in much smaller text it ends "me." He told me he did that purposely as he wanted the book to be much more about Howard Frye than him. This is much the way Norman lived his life. He expanded his life experience over the years into becoming a business owner and entrepreneur (in a one of a kind business in the US), a publisher, an author, an artist manager, a record label, the founder of a non-profit cultural organization and a non-profit foundation to fund people and organizations that promote mandolin, and a philanthropist and a visionary. When you add up all the time and energy necessary to accomplish all these pursuits to Norman's level of success, you see he indeed had a very full life.

He continued to give to the CMSA conventions and promotional activities through his foundation, and he attended every CMSA convention as a vendor until Denver in 2005. Many of you who attended our 2004 Philadelphia convention will remember Norman being taken to the hospital in very serious condition while working at the convention. During those two following years that Norman was unable to attend the convention for health reasons, he stayed in close contact with me by phone and email. He had a lifelong desire to see that mandolin was once again a household instrument in America. In his book about Howard Frye he talks about Frye's talons, and those of their mutual

*(Continued on page 6)*

## CMSA Founder Norman Levine

*(Continued from page 5)*

mentor (Luigi Paparello) still being embedded within him (paraphrase).

I never had the pleasure of meeting Howard Frye or Luigi Paparello, Norman's greatest mentors (in memory) until his last days. But I did have the pleasure of meeting, and getting to know well, this man who gave through his entire lifetime in service of others through his work for mandolin. Norman made the investment in me of his time, and also his money in sending me to Germany to represent CMSA at Zupfmusik Festival 2006. He succeeded in making me understand the importance of our instrument in the context of our American culture, and his example will be one that I know I can never match. I am a better mandolinist, musician and human being for having his influence in my life over these few short years.

I also know that Norman had family, and many friends who held him in quite high regard. I remember speaking with his nephew in New York City shortly

after the Philadelphia convention, while Norman was in the hospital. It became strikingly apparent from this conversation that Norman had a profound effect on family and friends that extended far beyond the mandolin activities he was so deeply involved in. He had always stayed involved with family and friends, even as busy as his life became with the work he loved.

I was sadly unable to attend the service for Norman, but through good friends I was able to have a pick buried with him. I remembered how many times he told me that he wanted to return to playing when he got old and retired. It is fitting that this Mandolin Journal is dedicated to Norman, as he is the reason our celebration of mandolin is enjoyed as a group.

Norman your work here is done, and it was done in the most superb fashion. Now the time you have waited for so long has come; the time to play. May you play in peace, knowing the world became a lot better place from having you in it.



*Bruce Graybill presenting Norman Levine with a 'certificate of lifetime achievement', Sarasota 2007*