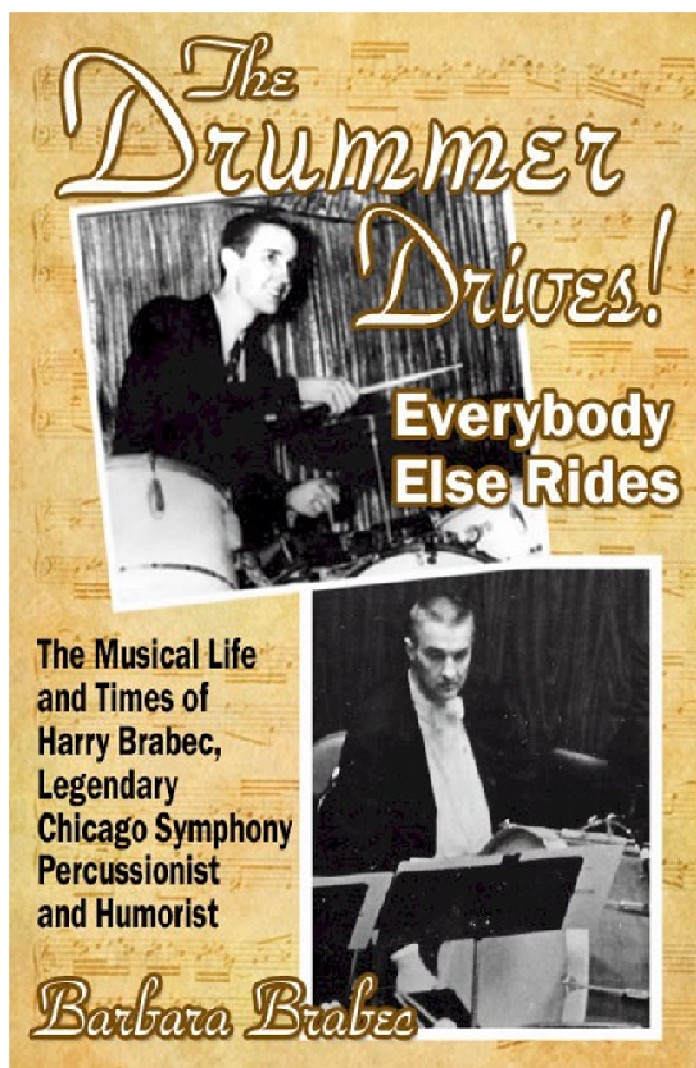


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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This SNEAK PEEK of the book is offered to acquaint interested buyers with the book's overall content and formatting. (Margins here are a bit wider than in the 6 x 9 book.) Due to the wide variety of topics discussed in it, no single chapter would be indicative of the entire book's subject matter. This document includes the opening and closing paragraphs of each chapter and the introductory quotation that sets the theme for it. Sandwiched between these paragraphs are the sub-headings in each chapter—basically the book's Table of Contents in a different format. Enjoy!

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Preface

The title of this book is a famous quotation by rhythm and blues drummer Panama Francis* that hit me dead center when I accidentally stumbled across it on the Web. It seemed to sum up Harry's life in a nutshell.

A good drummer always drives a band, and all the other musicians simply ride along. Francis' comment spoke to me not only about how my Harry could carry a band with his rock-steady beat, but how he lived his entire life. He was always the bold leader, always the one saying "Follow me, I know the way." He figured younger musicians should take his advice and follow his lead since he'd "been there, done that," and he expected me to do the same since he had ten years on me. I did follow him everywhere he wanted to go, but not always without protest.

Harry was quick on his feet and always ready to lead even when he didn't know the way; always willing to take chances for something he hoped to gain, or simply as a matter of principle. He dared to be different, even when he risked financial loss. His foolhardy nature often worried me and sometimes caused me distress, but more often than not, it simply made life with him interestingly unpredictable and exciting. As is true of most marriages, ours was not always a bed of roses. Harry gave me large measures of both supreme happiness and heartbreaking grief in our nearly 44 years together, yet we were perfectly suited to one another, and I loved him with all my heart. He remains the most complex, frustrating, interesting, and amusing person I've ever known, and the excitement and color he brought to my life cannot be conveyed in mere words.

This biography and autobiographic narrative places emphasis on that period of time when Harry was making both a personal comeback after a devastating divorce, and a musical comeback after losing his job as Principal Percussionist of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Beat by beat, I've described the jobbing life of a percussionist in Chicago in the sixties and early seventies, as well as what the music business itself was like in those days when the city was so vibrant with all kinds of musical entertainment.

Lest you imagine that this memoir is the result of an old widow's fuzzy memories, think again. It is based both on Harry's letters and scrapbooks as well as my own lifetime of letters, journals, and scrapbooks. In them, I documented my own brief career as a musical entertainer before I met Harry, the stories he told me, and the most interesting and amusing musical experiences I had as I watched him perform and mingle with others backstage.

Through excerpts from Harry's reminiscent and often amusing letters in the last ten years of his life—dictated to me because handwriting and typing were then too painful for his arthritic hands—you'll learn much about his life and the Chicago music scene in the forties and fifties before I met him. Here are his remembrances of the days when he was fresh out of high school and playing with the big bands and doing recordings in Chicago, his comments about many of the musicians and personalities he worked with through the years, his thoughts on being Czech, his love of band music, and how he felt about getting

old and being forced to lay down his sticks. In speaking with several of Harry's old school chums, relatives, former students, music buddies, and a couple of conductors he worked with, I picked up a wealth of revealing information about his past and delightful stories about him I had not heard before.

Without question, Harry was an exceptional musician, percussionist, and virtuoso snare drummer that many other musicians looked up to and admired, not only for his talent and abilities, but his keen sense of humor and gutsy approach to life. He was a risk-taker in both his professional and personal life—a daring improviser who lived for the moment and rarely worried about the future. Impetuous, gregarious, and sharp-witted, he always saw the funny side of any situation and was quick to share his humorous quips with me or anyone else who happened to be within earshot. In fact, his humor was as legendary as his musical ability, and I thank God I had the foresight to capture much of it in writing.

Early in our marriage when I realized I was married to a very funny fellow, I started what I called “My Funny Book.” In it, I recorded Harry's silly day-to-day utterings for posterity, figuring that if they made us laugh once, they'd make us laugh again later. Near the end of Harry's life when he was very ill and in great pain, I began to read some of his best jokes aloud to cheer him up. At one point after he stopped laughing at something he had said years before, he paused thoughtfully for a moment and then quietly said with humbleness, “I *was* pretty funny, wasn't I?” Funny how he had always taken his sense of humor for granted.

So now I hope you'll lean back in your seat and get comfortable, because the lights are dimming, the curtain's going up . . . and my musical story is about to begin.

* Panama Francis (1918–2001) became the first musician to be recognized by the Rhythm and Blues Foundation in 1993 and to be inducted into the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. His drumsticks are on display at the Rock-n-Roll Hall of Fame to commemorate his musical artistry and lifelong contributions to twentieth-century American music.

Chapter 1

Beginning Again

Just look for a guy with a rose in his teeth wearing baggy pants and looking like one of the last Mohicans.—Harry

I got my first glimpse of how Harry operated as a jobbing musician the day we went downtown to pick up our marriage license at City Hall. Afterward, Harry stopped off to see Bill Walker, a music contractor he had gotten jobs from in earlier years, just to let him know he was back in town and available for work. The guy was so busy he practically shoved Harry out the door. We had no sooner left his office than he hollered out, “What is it you play?”

Everything.

“Got four timps?”

Sure.

“Okay, be at Universal at 9 on Monday.”

Wham bam. Just like that.

“But you don’t have one drum, let alone four,” I said with pre-wifely concern.

“Yeah,” he grinned, “but I know where to get them. If I’d been totally honest, I’d have lost the job.”

A Whirlwind Courtship • Ready to Roll! • Feast or Famine

Finally, after many months of worry, Harry got the job he had been pursuing for some time: the 1962 summer season of Melody Top Theatre. At last—a few months of steady income we could count on.

Chapter 2

Melody Top Summer Theatre

Do you ever get the feeling that we’re in the wrong business?—Harry

Harry never wrote about his Melody Top experiences in any of his letters, but he kept a scrapbook of programs and reviews of shows he played. This was a job he really enjoyed, and it was terrific fun for me because I had a front row seat for every great musical that came in. The lineup of stars was mighty impressive to this small-town girl who never dreamed she would marry a professional musician who would not only make sure she had the best seat in the house for every job he played, but would also take her backstage to meet some of the performers.

Amusing Reviews for the 1962 Season • A Rip in Time • First Vacation and Other Work • The 1963 Melody Top Season • Melody Top's Last Season • "The Rain in Spain" • Backstage with Pete Fountain • End of an Era

Melody Top closed at the end of the 1965 season, and the closing was particularly memorable for the fact that . . .

Chapter 3

Divinely Connected by the Marimba

No one could have imagined then that my choice of a musical instrument would eventually link me directly to the man I was destined to marry.—Barbara

*H*ave you ever considered how some of the decisions you made in your youth dramatically affected your adult life? I've often reflected on the fact that I never would have met Harry if I hadn't fallen in love with the marimba when I was in grade school.

It all started when . . .

Better Marimbas and Lessons in Chicago • "Get an Act, Honey" • Supper Club Debut and Musician's Union Surprise • Entertaining Women's Clubs

I was always grateful to have had a little taste of the music business before I met Harry because it helped me to understand what he was going through as he struggled to make a living as a freelance musician.

Chapter 4

On Being Czech

"Do you come from a Czech home?" one Bohemian asks another. "No, it was white with blue shutters"
—An original Harry joke

*H*arry Joseph Brabec was born in Oak Park, Illinois on August 15, 1927. Raised in Cicero, a community heavily populated with Czechs, he took great pride in his Czech heritage, but he was also quick to make light of it, as the above joke indicates. Bohemians invented the trampoline, he said, which is what led to the first bounced Czech. To him, a Bohemian funeral was "a cancelled Czech."

Czech History and the “Bohemian Sausage Cheer” • Louis M. Blaha and J. Sterling Morton High School • “Blaha’s Blasting Bohemians” • Courting Girls in the Forties • Trekking to Berwyn for Goodies • “Food, Glorious Food”

I always loved cooking for Harry because he was such an appreciative eater. One year for Valentine’s Day, I surprised him with one of my woodcarvings of a sitting Indian chief holding a big bowl on his lap and a large spoon and fork in his hands. My homemade card asked if “Chief Hole-in-the-Belly” would be the valentine of “Squaw Cook-um-all-the-time.” If so, I promised to keep his big pot full.

Chapter 5

The Shubert Theatre Days

The memories of the Shubert gang will stick to me like a Bohemian love for mushrooms.—Harry

Harry didn’t reminisce in his letters about the shows he played at the Shubert Theatre, except to say once that “the memories of the Shubert gang will stick to me like a Bohemian love for mushrooms.” Fortunately, I captured several amusing stories in my journals, and Harry’s scrapbooks yielded other interesting details.

How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying • “I Hope You Boys Don’t Play Too Loud” • Harry’s Meat Baster Stunt in *Oliver* • *Funny Girl* • *Hello, Dolly!* • A Very Personal Shubert Theatre Story • Harry’s 1966 Percussion Recital • So You Want to Leave Show Biz?

The Shubert job was hard work. I never understood how musicians could do the same show night after night, week after week, month after month, without being bored to tears. I never objected to Harry stopping off for a drink with one of his buddies after a show because I knew how hard it was for him to unwind after any kind of performance. But something happened one night . . .

Chapter 6

Flashback to the Forties and Harry’s Big Band Days

The “hot” bands played big band jazz, but oh, those one-nighters! I’m sure I could build the inside of a bus blindfolded.—Harry

Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said that “Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.” Before I continue with Harry’s story, I want to take you back to the forties and fifties before I knew him.

Reconstructing this part of his life was an exciting challenge for me as a writer. Halfway through the writing of this book, I began to feel like a detective who was trying to put a huge “Harry Brabec Puzzle” together. With the help of a couple of his old friends and one of his students, I began to track down and talk to more of his old school chums and musicians of that era who knew or had worked with him. Bit by bit I found answers to many of the questions I had about this part of Harry’s life. I couldn’t believe how much about him I didn’t know even after nearly 44 years of marriage.

**Jobbing in High School • Two Years with Wayne King
• Touring and Recording with Chuck Foster • Foster and Band
Personnel Stories • Recordings, Transcriptions, V-Disks and
Soundies • Musicians in Glenn Miller’s Band • The “Sweet
Bands”**

Harry’s comments about his one-nighters brought to mind an amusing story he told me about one night when the Foster band was on the road between locations. They had stopped for dinner and . . .

Chapter 7

Chicago’s Radio/TV Orchestras and Recording Studios

If a musician or singer made a noticeable mistake or if the announcer ran long or short on his copy, another complete take was required. If you couldn’t deliver consistently perfect takes, you didn’t last long in the studios, no matter how good you sounded.

—Loren Binford, jingle business researcher

Trying to document Harry’s years at NBC, and the times when he was doing jingles and recording sessions, proved to be the most difficult part of his musical life to reconstruct. But thanks to contacts provided by Loren Binford, I was able to track down a number of musicians who either knew or worked with Harry in the mid-fifties.

**The NBC Studio Orchestra • Chicago’s Jingle Business • Making
Recordings and Commercials • Booking Agents, Contractors,
and Recording Studios • Hotel Jobs, Night Clubs, and Chicago
Gangsters • A Tale of Two Drum Shops**

(This chapter ends with a story from Bill Crowden, Drums Unlimited, about a joke Harry pulled on him that he said almost gave him a heart attack.)

Chapter 8

The Chicago Symphony Years

There are only two men in the world I hate, and
Fritz Reiner is both of them.—Harry

Ihere's an old joke about how to get to Carnegie Hall with the punch line being "practice." In addition to lots of practice, Harry worked his way up to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO) gradually and steadily, first by . . .

**The National Symphony Orchestra • Rafael Kubelik and Harry
• Legendary Brabec-Reiner Stories • A Shotgun Confrontation
• The Story Behind the Story • A Mentor to Many • More
Stories from Fellow Musicians • Recordings Made with Fritz
Reiner • Other Fritz Reiner Stories • The Painful Aftermath •
Three Punches to the Gut**

Suddenly, everything was gone. His job, his career, his wife, his daughter, and every material thing he owned, except for what he had taken out of town with him. All the instruments and drum equipment he had left behind, all his music, books, records, scrapbooks, photo albums, school medals, tools, clothes . . . *every material possession he had acquired over a period of 32 years*—gone.

Kaput.

Totally beaten at that point, his spirit crushed, Harry simply gave up.

Chapter 9

Taking another Chance on Love and Music

Hope for the best, expect the worst.

Life is a play. We're unrehearsed.

—Mel Brooks, comedian, producer, director

In the summer of 1961, while I was busy working a part-time secretarial job at the Harding Restaurant Company and pursuing my little part-time music career, Harry once again found himself performing with the Chicago Symphony as an extra man working alongside Gordon Peters, his old school chum from Morton, now the

orchestra's principal percussionist and, coincidentally, the man I had been dating that summer. Gordon always went to Maine in August to study conducting with Pierre Monteux, but before he left this time, he suggested that Harry call me . . .

Bad Habits Broken • Touring with the Symphony • Ring Dem Bells! • Onward to Alaska • Back with the Symphony Full Time • Chicago's "Killer Storm of '67" • Memorable Music Moments of 1967 • Trouble Ahead

It didn't take long for Harry's restless spirit to kick in again. I saw the handwriting on the wall early in 1971 when he put in an application for a job at Disney World, which was scheduled to open in December that year. Week after week, he would come home complaining about "all the crap" he had to put up with at Orchestra Hall, saying that the only thing that would make him stay would be a substantial raise. In June, when that raise was not forthcoming, Harry said the hell with it, I've had it, I'm outta here.

Chapter 10

The Lure of Disney World

I'm too old to pimp, and too young to die, so I'm just gon' keep playin'.

—Clark Terry, world-class trumpeter

*I*t was 1971, and Harry was getting ready to skip town after having slammed the door on his Chicago Symphony job that would have given us financial security for the rest of our lives. He didn't have a job with Disney World yet, but we moved to Florida anyway because he figured that if things didn't work out there, he'd find something else. Once again, Harry was "betting on the come" . . .

The Walt Disney World Marching Band • Disney World's Grand Opening • The "76 Trombones" Recording • The Life of a Disney Musician • Cinderella Castle • All That Glitters is Not Gold • Leaving on a High Note

With no money to spare, Harry decided we should move ourselves this time. He had never driven a big U-Haul truck before, or packed a truck for that matter, but little details like that never stopped him. With the help of Rich Sherrill and three of his other students, Harry packed that truck so professionally and so tight we could barely cram in a roll of toilet paper and a box of Tide before closing the door.

Chapter 11

A Man of Many Interests and Talents

There are still a lot of books to read and a lot of fish to catch.—Harry

Neither Harry nor I went to college, which worked fine for me, but his situation was different. In his later years he would come to deeply regret his lack of a college degree. Of course his logic for not going to college was perfectly sound. Rejected by the military, he had exciting work waiting for him right out of high school with the Civic Orchestra. He didn't need a college degree to play percussion in any orchestra, and he believed that once he achieved his goal of getting into the Chicago Symphony that he'd have a job for life. At eighteen, however, he couldn't have imagined the agonizing twists and turns his life would take, or . . .

**“Smarter than the Average Bear” • Brabec the Bibliophile
• Trivia and the English Language • Word Play • An Amazing
Collection of Music • Amusing Surprises in the Cassette Tape
Boxes • Seeing Harry through His Files, Notebooks, and
Scrapbooks • The Drummer's Workshop and Packrat
Tendencies**

Did I just say Harry was a practical saver? Maybe that's not the right adjective. He didn't have a bathrobe when we married, and every night when he got home from a job he'd strip to his shorts and then sit around until he got sleepy. I was afraid he'd catch cold, so I made him a white robe for Christmas from the plushiest terry cloth fabric I could find. He was delighted with it—but “delighted” didn't quite cover it. Harry *loved* that robe, and as both he and the garment aged (with him getting thicker around the middle as the robe wore thinner on the shoulders), he pleaded with me to patch it. I patched and patched that robe for years, finally buying him a beautiful new one the first time he had to be hospitalized because I was too embarrassed for him to be seen in that ratty old thing. He wore the new robe in the hospital to please me, but the minute he got home, he switched back to his old one. I think now this garment would have qualified for “Ripley's Believe It or Not,” because it was still in his closet 43 years later when he died. He simply wouldn't let me throw it away.

Sentimental saver that I am, I couldn't bring myself to throw it away, either, opting instead to cut pieces of usable fabric for my ragbag.

Harry would have approved of that.

Chapter 12

Playing Life by Ear

Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.

—Theodore Roosevelt

When we left Florida in the spring of 1973 to resettle in Missouri, the tempo of Harry's life gradually slowed from Vivace to Allegro and changed key as well. Now the music was gone, and he was beginning to play life by ear, learning how to do work he never imagined he would be doing to make a living. Like the old timpani player he was, he began to retune his life to stay on key and figure out a new way to roll.

**The Silver Dollar City Crafts Festival • Music in the Ozarks
• The International Crafts Exposition • Dining on the Way to
Germany • Forced to Move Again**

Real estate was climbing, interest rates were rising, and neither of us had a clue about what we were going to do in 1978 to earn a living. We had owned three homes in the past, but now we believed we might never be able to buy another house, and Harry just couldn't come to terms with that on top of all his other personal and work challenges. With no other options available to us, we moved into a very nice rented condominium in the next town over, even though we knew we could only have it for six months. By the time we got resettled, both of us were nearing our physical and emotional limits.

Chapter 13

Dark Days in Brabecland

The light is at the end of the tunnel, and you have to walk through the dark to get to it.

—Linda Lavin, Actress

When we left Florida in 1973, it marked the end of Harry's long and very successful thirty-year career as a full-time musician, as well as the beginning of his life as an entrepreneur who was trying to find another way to use his unique skills and talents to make a living. The work with Silver Dollar City and Busch Gardens that followed was a blessing in our lives in more ways than one. But things really went downhill when he learned that . . .

**Harry's Deepening Depression • Situation Desperate • Hitting
Bottom Once Again • More Disappointment in the Eighties • A
Symphony Fiasco • Back to Chicago Again • "But at least we
ain't got locusts" • Lifestyle and Attitude Changes**

I continued to write more books and do an increasing number of speaking engagements. Early on, I began to endear myself to audiences by sharing Harry's humor as it related to working at home. On returning from one conference, I told him that his jokes in my keynote speech got a lot of laughter and made me look good as a speaker.

"Since I'm contributing to your success as a speaker," he said, "I think I ought to be paid for the jokes I write." And that's how Harry launched his new sideline business as a gag writer. He said I had to pay him \$5 for each humorous story I published or used in a speech. Either that, or he'd quit being funny. Since I couldn't stand to live with an old grouch, I didn't have much choice here. I just tried to figure out how to deduct that expense on my Schedule C tax return.

Chapter 14

Nostalgic Music Remembrances

When I get too old to drum, I'll still have you
to marimba.—Anon.

Harry wrote interesting letters, and he could have written a great book about his life if he had put his mind to it. But just as I thought one musician in the family was enough, perhaps he figured one writer in the family was enough. Prior to 1993, I never read any of the letters Harry wrote to friends or the replies he got, just as he did not read my personal correspondence. We each had our own interests and friends, and valued the privacy of the other.

When it began to get difficult for him to write letters by hand or type them himself, I encouraged him to start dictating them to me for typing, at which point I began to save them on computer. Only then did I realize what interesting and amusing letters he had been writing all his life. Even so, what he said in those letters didn't mean much to me at the time I typed them, because I was always so selfishly focused on my own writing and in a hurry to get back to my work. However, when I reread all of his letters in total after he was gone, I realized how much music history he had documented in them, and I was touched by his own gift for writing.

**Joe Sperry and Harry's Old Drum Set • Ollie Zinsmeister,
Xylophonist Extraordinaire • Five Famous Russian Composers
• A Twenty-Year Correspondence with Doug MacLeod •
Harry's Most Amusing Letter**

Dear John:

What have we done!!! Your recipe for Polenta came and has been made several times; relished each time more than the time before. Barb thinks it's the greatest thing since Herbert L. Clarke.

But, we are in deep trouble. Let me explain. We made the mistake of giving some of this Italian ambrosia to our neighbor, he being second generation hillbilly, the kind of folks who say, "Mah fanger hirts so ah'm goin' to Sprangfield to get it done rat."

Well, anyway, we gave these people the recipe and here's where the trouble started . . .

Chapter 15

Winding Down a Long Musical Career

It occurs to me that music, with the possible exception of riding a bull, is the most uncertain way to make a living I know. In either case, you can get bucked off, thrown, stepped on, trampled—and if you get on at all, at best it's a short and bumpy ride.—Cowboy singing star Gene Autry

*J*ust as you can take the boy out of the country, but can't take the country out of the boy, one could never take the love of performing out of Harry. Although his career as a full-time musician ended when he left Disney, he continued to play [. . .] into the early nineties until his severe back pain, arthritis, and heart problems finally forced him to lay down his sticks for good.

But it wasn't just age and physical limitations that were making it difficult for him to find work. By 1980, the music industry he had known in the sixties and seventies had changed considerably. Today, it is so different that it's nearly impossible for freelance musicians to find enough work to make a living in Chicago unless they're also into teaching, writing, arranging, conducting, or recording.

Chicago's Music Business Then and Now • Playing A Chorus Line • The Bensenville Concert Band • The Windjammers Circus Band • Masonic Musicians • Sitting in with the Carson & Barnes Circus

It so happened that the day we saw the Carson & Barnes Circus was also our twentieth wedding anniversary, and I gave Harry a collector's circus plate with a card that read . . .

Chapter 16

The Last Difficult Decade

Getting older isn't so bad; it's trying to maintain your oldness that wears you down.—Harry

*I*n September 1995, prior to going on vacation to our favorite cabin in the woods of Wisconsin, Harry had been expressing concern about his health. He hadn't been feeling "right" for a couple of months, and he'd been having some feelings of

pressure in his chest. He didn't think they were related to his heart because he'd just gone through an intensive series of tests a couple of months earlier and the doctor saw no problem then. Yet he was concerned enough that he made a map for me and a list of all the towns on the way up and back that had hospitals, just in case he had a heart attack or something during our vacation. (He always joked that I couldn't find my way out of a paper sack, and a map in my hands was a lethal weapon.)

Nine Days that Changed Our Lives • Talking to God • A New Perspective on Life • A Hard Row to Hoe • Dancing with Death • Is That Jimmy Stewart I See There? • Special Blessings and Small Miracles • Going Home

“Harry was a musician to the end,” my sister Mollie noted, “with his heart going from prestissimo to a peaceful adagio ending.”

Chapter 17

A Widow's Ponderings and Regrets

“He was always difficult, but he never was a bore.”
—Harry's suggestion for an embroidered pillow

I still remember the day decades ago when Harry and I were driving around Chicago and passed a tombstone factory. As we began to muse about what our own headstones might say about us, I had a rare flash of genius. He laughed heartily when I said to him, “If you should precede me to the great beyond, I know exactly what I'll have inscribed on your headstone: *“Here lies Harry Brabec. He finally took his drum and beat it.”*

“No Fanfare, Please” • Harry's Estranged Daughter • A Widow's “Busy Work” • No Ordinary Joe • Thoughts about Love • Being a Witness to Someone's Life

Without question, Harry marched to the beat of a different drummer. Though his life has ended, the beat goes on.

Encore, Encore!

You may forget the one with whom you have laughed, but never the one with whom you have wept.—Kahlil Gibran

REPRISE: “Harry had the ability to move freely from one subject to another as easily as he could move from playing a circus one day to performing in the symphony the next. What he was really good at was making some smartass remark that fit the exact situation we were in at the time. His brain always seemed to be running a hundred miles a minute, and every conversation would have some humor in it because he would immediately take all the data, the environment, and the people there at the time, process it faster than the fastest computer, and spit out a humorous quip.”—Rich Sherrill

The book’s encore features a “baker’s dozen” of short stories that illustrate how Harry made me laugh from day to day when I least expected to be amused.

Appendix

Harry J. Brabec – Professional Background

Harry J. Brabec – Known Recordings

Original Harry Brabec Quotations
and Other Quotations He Clipped and Saved

Index

(7 page comprehensive index)