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HOUSE CALL

Harry Connick Jr. on Having to Deal With Loss at Age 13

The singer revisits how music and acting helped ease his childhood blues

By Marc Myers

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Harry Connick Jr., 52, is a Grammy- and Emmy-winning singer, pianist, bandleader, arranger and actor. His latest album, “True Love: A Celebration of Cole Porter” (Verve), is out Oct. 25. He spoke with Marc Myers.

My passion for jazz began early. There’s a video of me dancing at a Mardi Gras parade in New Orleans when I was about 2. I started playing our family piano when I was 3.

Before I was born, my parents owned a record shop called Studio A. They both loved music and ran the store for a few years while they put themselves through law school.

When I was little, we lived on 20th Street in the Lakeview section of the city. Our house was a modest 1,500-square-foot, one-story, redbrick ranch with an asphalt roof. There were three bedrooms, so my older sister, Suzanna, me and my parents each had our own room. Hurricane Katrina destroyed the house in 2005. It was torn down soon after.

My parents met in Casablanca, Morocco, after World War II. My mom, Anita, originally was from New York, and my dad, Harry, was from Mobile, Ala.

My father was there with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and my mother worked for an insurance company. After they married in Morocco in 1953, they moved to New Orleans, where they ended up going to law school.

My parents were as committed to my passion for music as they were to their own careers. They never stood in my way or demanded I follow them into law. I wasn’t smart enough to do that

anyway, and they knew it. Music is all I ever wanted to do or could do. I started taking piano lessons and playing concerts at about age 5.



Mr. Connick at age 6 with his mother, Anita, his father, Harry Sr., and his sister, Suzanna, at City Park in New Orleans in 1973.
PHOTO: CONNICK FAMILY ARCHIVES

When I was 10, my mom got sick with ovarian cancer. I didn't quite understand what was going on. I just assumed she would get better.

She would tell me every day before school, "Be a leader." At 10, I had no idea what she was talking about. But I made sure I was first in line in school at lunchtime.

She laughed when I told her I was the leader on line. She then patiently explained that she wanted me always to try to do the right thing and set an example for others. "That's a leader," she said.

Mom died when I was 13. I had a ton of trouble adjusting to my new reality. To this day, my mom's passing is the most difficult thing I've had to endure emotionally.

In high school, I began acting in musicals, such as “Anything Goes” and “Ain’t Misbehavin’.” When we did “Guys and Dolls,” I was sure I’d get the Sky Masterson role. Instead, I was cast as Harry the Horse. The teacher later told me that he saw how much I loved performing and was afraid I’d be there around the clock and flunk out of school. He knew me well.

When I was 14, I auditioned for an intensive afternoon program at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. I was accepted and took piano lessons with Ellis Marsalis, the father of Branford and Wynton.

In high school, I nearly flunked out. Looking back, I think I had attention-deficit disorder. I clearly was a different kind of learner. The schools weren’t set up to deal with individual learning styles.

After high school, I was ready to move to New York to pursue my music career. Dad asked me to give college a chance. I did, for a single semester at Loyola University. I really tried. I just wasn’t a good student.

I left for New York in 1986. George Butler, the A&R director of jazz for Columbia Records, had heard about me. He told me to call him when I came to New York. So I did, every single day for six months. Finally, he got tired of me calling and signed me in 1987. That was my start.

Today, my wife, Jill, and I live in New Canaan, Conn. We have three daughters. We’re all extremely close. We prize our privacy. When friends of our daughters come over, we politely ask them not to post anything from the house.

My mother loved to draw. Among my most precious possessions are a couple of her pencil-line drawings. They hang in my home and keep an eye on me.

I think of my mom as someone who never patronized me, as someone who made me feel like I was the smartest, most capable and talented person in the world. I miss her greatly.

CONNICK’S TONICS

Favorite New Orleans pianists: Ellis Marsalis and James Booker

Most influential singer growing up: Louis Armstrong

Favorite New Orleans dish: Red beans and rice with just a little hot sausage

Favorite New Orleans restaurant: Azul, on Harrison Avenue

Favorite New Orleans sandwich: Oyster Po’boy from Mandina’s on Canal Street



Louis Armstrong on 'The Ed Sullivan Show' in 1966. PHOTO: CBS PHOTO ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

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