

This article by Sunita Staneslow was first published in the February 2019 issue of the Sylvia Woods Harp Center e-Newsletter

You can find Sunita's PDFs at www.harpcenter.com/Sunita

I was raised in a family that relished exotic food and loved to travel. And, of course, there was always music in our house. As a child, I would fall asleep listening to my mother practice the piano and the harpsichord. Music by Scott Joplin and Scarlatti were my lullabies.

Music, travel and adventure have always been part of my life. My father is a linguist and taught Hindi at the University of Minnesota. Sunita is common Bengali name. I traveled to India for the first time when I was only ten years old. I took lessons in ski jumping and competed before I could even carry my large skis up the slope. I also spent a summer with Outward Bound learning to rock climb in Colorado.

When I was eight, my parents bought a Troubadour harp from the front window of a music store. My first lessons were from a high school harpist who lived just down the street from us in St. Paul, Minnesota. And, one summer in my teens I studied the harp at Tanglewood.

While majoring in International Relations at Tufts University, I commuted once a week to Boston University for harp lessons with Lucile Lawrence. Then, during my junior year, I studied in Paris with Lily Laskine. After college, I headed to Israel and studied with Judith Liber, the harpist with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. While there, I subbed for the Jerusalem Symphony. I was preparing for a career in classical music and never thought that my career would blossom by returning to the folk harp and playing folk music.



In the mid '80's I shared an apartment in Israel with musicians who were part of the vibrant Jerusalem folk music scene, and would jam for hours. I felt so limited because I didn't have the skills to improvise or join in. I wanted a harp part that was written for me that I could put on my music stand. I was more comfortable in the world of classical music. Learning to venture off the page and create my own arrangements was a gradual process that changed the course of my career.

I met a nice Jewish boy from Edinburgh in Jerusalem in 1985 and fell madly in love. Fred and I were married a year later and I dragged him to New York City so that I could study for my Master's Degree at the Manhattan School of Music.

On a trip visiting Fred's family in Scotland, we visited the harp builder, Jack Yule. A year later, I was a proud owner of a Scottish folk harp (clarsach). This is the harp Fred and I took on our yearlong trip around the world in 1989-1990. We financed our adventure by busking. I put together a show of some of the Jewish melodies I learned in Israel and Celtic music from books by Sylvia Woods and Kim Robertson.

The last stop of our adventure was Minnesota. We bought a house and our son and daughter were born in the Twin Cities. We kept traveling back to Israel during the cold Minnesota winters for several months every year. American harpists that needed Jewish music for weddings often contacted me. It was my husband Fred who encouraged me to publish my arrangements.

I continued to work with Israeli musicians during the winters we spent in Israel. Akiva Ben-Horin helped me find the rhythm and harmonies to accompany some of the melodies I have arranged for my Jewish music books. *Mi Yitnani Of (Who Will Give Me Wings)* is a melody that I learned from Akiva and still perform today. It is in my [Collection of Jewish Melodies](#) book. I also worked with a Ladino storyteller. A Ladino folk song, *Adio Querida*, is in my [Solo Harp](#) book, and is one of my all-time favorite pieces. I got in at the beginning of the wave of arranged music for the harp and caught the attention of Afghan Press and Sylvia Woods. Sylvia Woods was one of the first publishers and distributors of my music. Thank you Sylvia!



During the summer of 2000, we took the plunge and moved to Israel. I have worked as a therapeutic harpist in a children's hospital near Tel Aviv since 2007. My relaxing and improvisatory recording, *Sea and Sky* was inspired by my work at the hospital. My book, [Sea and Sky](#) is a companion to my CD -- almost note for note.



In 2015, Fred and I decided it was time for another adventure. We cycled across Europe all the way to Shetland and circled back. It seems a bit crazy now, but since I had an indestructible carbon fiber harp built by Heartland Harps, we attached the harp to a trailer behind our tandem. I thought that I would have lots of time to arrange and compose, but learned that I really need to stay in one spot and focus on arranging. We fell in love with Shetland and found a rundown stone house in need of renovation. I plan to use this house in mid-summer as a personal retreat to arrange music. I am drawn to the power of sacred music, and last summer I

arranged a book of [Psalms based on Celtic melodies](#) while I was on the isle of Unst in Shetland.

Combining touring with teaching and sharing many of the special places and people I have met seemed the natural next step. Fred founded a unique tour company in Israel and Palestine and it was time that we teamed up. Our *2019 Israel / Palestine Harp Adventure* will be from October 24 to November 3. And our third *Scottish Harp Tour* will be from June 12 to 23, 2019. (See www.sunitaharp.com for more information.)



I feel that I have come full circle. I love being part of the worldwide harp community.

- Sunita

Photos:

1. Sunita with her Dusty Strings harp
2. Sunita playing harp at the Dead Sea
3. Sunita and her harp, from a promo photo for her band Vida
4. Fred and Sunita with their tandem bike and her Heartland Harp
5. Sunita playing on the train in Italy with a gypsy accordionist.