

Hand to Mouth

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A fist fight with Al Jolson. A musical arrangement from George Gershwin. A back seat liaison with Vivien Leigh. Most men would consider just one of these the accomplishment of a lifetime. But Jerry Adler had experienced them all and more before his 20th birthday.

Story by Larry Widen

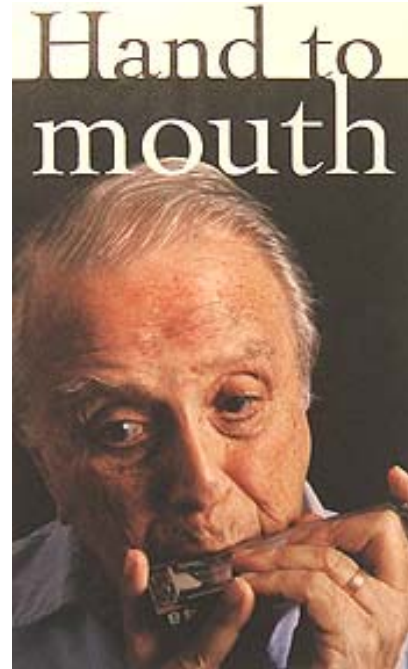
In 66 years of show business, harmonica player Jerry Adler traveled all over the world, palled around with Hollywood stars, and performed with some of the greatest personalities of our time. This year, at the age of 87, Adler has finally written his considerable memoirs into a book called *Living from Hand to Mouth*.

During a recent interview, Adler talked about how he finally got around to doing something he talked about all his life. “My first wife Sylvia was the one who actually pushed me into this,” he says. “She thought I had a really exciting story to tell.” But Adler, even with the best of intentions, always found a reason not to get started. His wife was diagnosed with cancer in 1995 and passed away without ever getting chance to see the idea come to fruition. “Her doctors thought it would be a good idea for me to do the project as a way to deal with losing her,” Adler says. “Turns out they were right. I needed something like this to fill the void.”

So he purchased a computer, and at the age of 77, taught himself to use it. Along the way, he met his second wife, Jean, who encouraged him to stay with the project. “One day, I called her into the den and said I thought I had a pretty good beginning,” he says. “From there, it just kind of flowed out of me.”

Adler’s story starts in 1918, in Baltimore, Maryland, where he came from what he calls a working-class Jewish family. “My father was a plumber who made \$50 a week,” he says. “We lived better than some, not as well as others.” Adler was born in the midst of America’s worst influenza epidemic, and mothers and children were dying by the thousands. Sickly as a child, he was often left out of sports and other physical activities in the neighborhood. To pass the time, Adler listened to the family record player and tried to follow along on a harmonica given to him by his father. To Adler’s surprise, he mastered the instrument within a matter of weeks. His brother encouraged him to enter a talent contest at one of the local vaudeville theaters in 1931, when he was only 13. Adler won first prize, which was the chance to appear at the theater for one week with the headliner, comedian Red Skelton. “That was really the beginning of my show business career,” Adler says. “Skelton saw me watching him every night from the wings, and he gave me all kind of tips to be a better performer.” Adler says Skelton taught him what to do with his hands, how to stand, and most importantly to never step on his own applause. “Everything he showed me helped me on my next job.”

A British talent agent happened to be in the audience one evening, and after the show he came backstage to offer Adler a contract to perform in the London Palladium for \$500 a week. “My family was against it initially, but this was ten times the money my father was making,” he says. “In the end, I went to London.”



A year later, at the age of 15, Adler decided to take his chances in New York City. He walked up and down Broadway, stopping into every theater hoping for an audition. At the Paramount in Times Square, Adler brazenly told the doorman he had an appointment with bandleader Paul Whiteman. “Apparently Mr. Whiteman was in a good mood that day, because he told the doorman to show me in,” Adler recalls. “I went into a wildly improvised version of ‘Button up Your Overcoat,’” he says. “I wanted to impress him in the worst way.” So intent was Adler on his performance that he paid no attention to a man sitting in the corner of the office reading a newspaper. When he finished, Whiteman congratulated him and asked if he knew how to play ‘Rhapsody in Blue.’ “I had heard it, of course,” Adler says. “But I couldn’t play it. So I told Whiteman I didn’t like it.” The bandleader turned to the man reading the newspaper and said ‘Hey George, the kid doesn’t like ‘Rhapsody in Blue.’ “And that’s how I met George Gershwin,” Adler says. “He was very kind to me, and said I was a great musician. Later, he wrote a special arrangement of the song just for me.”

While working at the Palace Theater, Adler got into a scrap one day with Al Jolson, the blackface entertainer who was the star. “Jolson called for the Nicholas brothers, who were tap dancers, to come down and shine his shoes,” Adler says. “Now I was only 17, but I knew that wasn’t right, and I told him so.” Adler says Jolson grabbed him and the two fell out into the alley throwing punches at one another. Eventually the stage manager was able to stop the fight. “Jolson shined his own shoes that day,” Adler says with a laugh. Adler toured the country nonstop for the next several years, working on vaudeville shows with Jimmy Durante, W.C. Fields, Danny Kaye, Milton Berle and Benny Goodman.

It wasn’t too many more years before Adler came to the attention of the Hollywood studios. Soon his musical services were in demand all over Tinsel Town, and he worked on scores with Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney, Cary Grant, Frank Sinatra and many others. For the film *Pot O’ Gold*, Adler taught star James Stewart how to play the harmonica well enough to do it onscreen. The two stayed lifelong friends, and Adler continued to give lessons to Stewart every Sunday afternoon. It was in 1937, while working on the film *Sidewalks of London* that he met British actress Vivien Leigh. “I couldn’t take my eyes off of her,” Adler says. “She was so beautiful.” Adler says one day Leigh offered to give the 19-year-old a ride home in her limousine. “It was very private back there and one thing led to another,” he says.

Other Hollywood friends included Betty Grable, Jack Benny, Marlene Dietrich, and James Cagney, who invited Adler to become a member of his bowling team. “It was crazy, because all these people would come to the bowling alley to watch Cagney,” Adler says. “The manager would let them watch for about 20 minutes, and then he’d shoo them off and let another group come in.”

By the 1950’s vaudeville shows had been replaced by television, and Adler found himself looking for work. He found it on cruise ships that were looking for ways to entertain their passengers. For the next several decades, Adler worked for nearly every cruise line, earning as much as \$3,500 a week for his services. “That was easy work,” he says. “I only had to play one of two shows a week. The rest of the time I could relax on the ship.” Adler says he left the cruise business in the 1980s when the owners began asking their entertainers to fly from ship to ship and perform. Instead he found lucrative employment on the Florida condo circuit. “I had no idea this existed,” he says. “But they booked entertainers like Howard Keel, Tony Bennett, Milton Berle, so I just followed them in there.”

Adler no longer performs professionally, but he’ll whip out his chromatic (48 note) harmonica in an instant and give his guest a sample of what made him stay in demand for more than 60 years. “I’m content to sell my books at this point in my life,” he says. “I’ve got my own website and I’m selling books all over the world.” Adler says Sylvia would be proud that he finally finished the project she inspired all those years ago.