

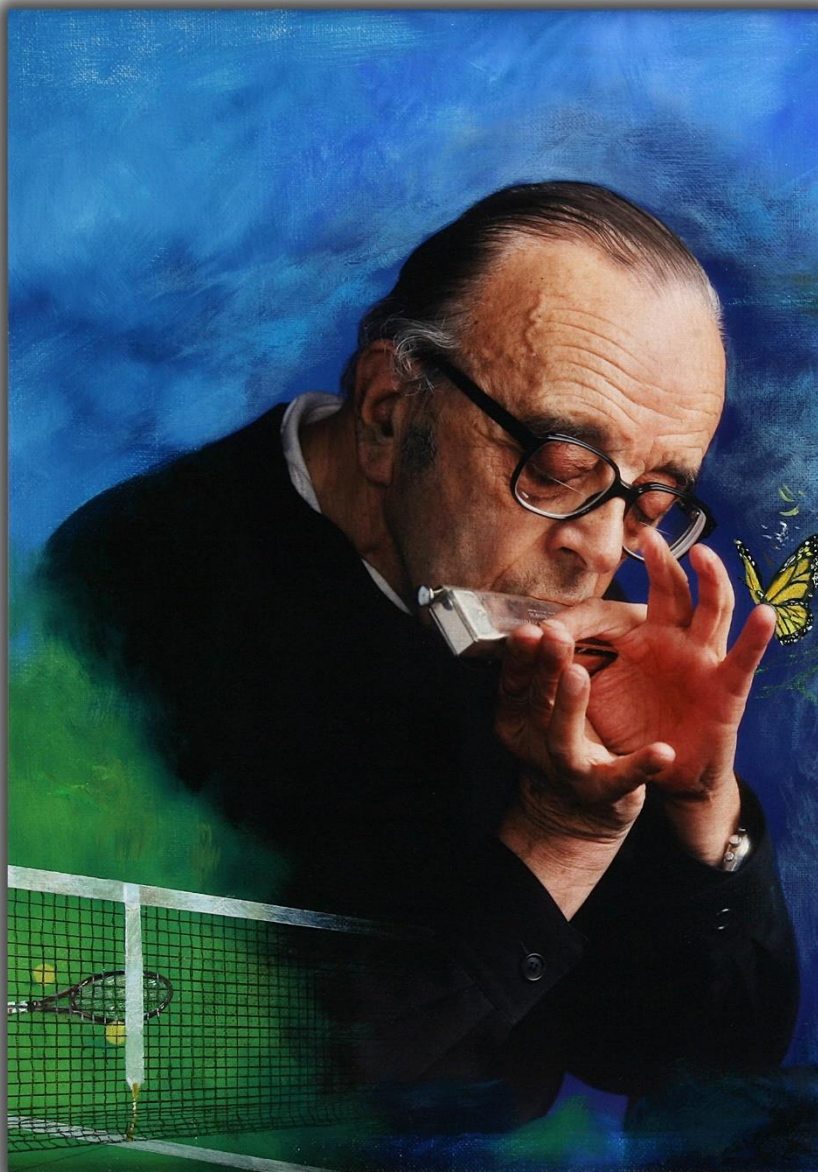
REFLECTIONS

A Tribute to Larry Adler

by

Gary Italiaander

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Dedicated to the memory of

LARRY ADLER

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I would like to thank all those who have helped to make this tribute a reality. I began the process shortly after Larry's death, and I am delighted that so many contributions have come from his family, friends and those that had the privilege of making music with him.

In particular, I want to thank my wife Tamar for her support without which this book definitely would not have seen the light of day. In addition, a huge thank you to my daughter Elise who has recently entered the world of publishing. She has been in the perfect position to assist me with the editing. Last, my parents for their continuing support and particularly my father, who has created illustrations where no photographs exist.

“Once the harmonica is in my hands and ready to play, it immediately loses its identity and becomes instead, an orchestra with strings, woodwind and brass and a rhythm section with me both as conductor and player.”

Larry Adler

Quote from Accordion Times and Harmonica News, Feb 1936.

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FOREWORD

Why this book?

This is something I cannot easily answer.

That I felt a compelling responsibility to create a tribute to Larry Adler is without question.

His talent inspired me as I had displayed musical ability at a young age. Music is still a passionate interest to me although my work has taken me in a different direction. I have been fortunate enough to meet many interesting celebrities through my work as a portrait photographer but Larry was the one person I always wanted to meet and photograph. Not only did I get that opportunity but an amazing friendship developed as well.

We had shared interests; we both loved music with the ability to create it. It's just that his ability to do so was in a different league to mine! I would not be so presumptuous as to compare my musical talent to Larry's in any way but that unquestionably had a bearing on how our friendship developed and my need to create this project.

We also shared a love of tennis. When I first met Larry he was still playing occasionally and when I asked him if he won, his reply was; "I never win!" Somehow, knowing the man, I doubt this was the case and I feel sure that, at least in his younger days, he was rather good.

We did discuss creating a book together but at that time Larry wasn't able to make a commitment as he was already in his early eighties - still travelling, performing and busy with the writing that he was doing for a variety of magazines. He did however provide a number of opportunities for me to create a photographic record. The reason for making such a record was unclear at the time, but I felt it was important to do it all the same. The significance became apparent once he'd departed the stage, with the concept for this book.

While Larry was in hospital in London, seriously ill, he received an invitation to perform in a concert at the Royal Albert Hall for Prince Phillip's 80th birthday. He was told by his doctors that he was far too unwell to attend (to which he agreed); nevertheless, he slipped out of the hospital and made his way to the venue. Only when he appeared on television were the medical staff aware that he had done so. No matter what his state of health, it was always Larry's view that 'the show must go on!'

At the time of his funeral I was abroad, but I was invited by his family to attend the memorial concert that took place at The Arts Theatre in London some time later. During that concert, when his family, friends and associates spoke of him, it became clear to me that I should gather together thoughts and comments from those who knew him personally and so I began collecting memories from those closest to him. However, for a variety of reasons, I became aware that it was the wrong time to complete this project.

Two of the most important people in Larry's life were his brother Jerry and Larry's partner for the last eighteen years of his life, Gloria Leighton. Jerry was delighted to be able to put something on record. Gloria was more reticent as she was unsure whether she had the ability to write but she eventually agreed (with lots of encouragement from me). This was only on the basis that my wife, Tamar, would do all the typing for her and I am extremely grateful that Tamar agreed to do so. Gloria had a lot to contribute, as you will, and so I am delighted that we were able to capture her own very special thoughts. It is fortunate that I started the process when I did as sadly both Jerry and Gloria are no longer with us.

Once I realised the 100th anniversary of Larry's birth would be in 2014, I decided that it was time to complete the project. Nearly everyone I have been able to contact has agreed to participate. I am delighted that I have been able to gather so many contributors who have added their own 'reflections'.

This book provides a brief history of Larry's life, interspersed with my own commentary, as well as tributes from his family, friends and associates. What clearly emerges is that Larry was the greatest of entertainers, perfectly at home performing on the mouthorgan (as he preferred to call it rather than the more usual harmonica) or as a raconteur, speaking and joking with his audiences. His approach to performing remained the same, regardless of what had happened or how he felt.

So, I now feel that I have achieved what I set out to do, creating this tribute. Larry; although in many ways he appeared down to earth and quite ordinary, he left his mark on our world in the most extraordinary way. I am honoured that he allowed me to share some memorable times with him that I can now share with you, along with those reflections of his family, friends and colleagues.

The Dream

It was early morning, 6th August 2001 when I awoke from a dream.

That may not seem particularly unusual, except in my case I am rarely aware of dreaming (even when they have taken place) and even less likely to remember them.

The dream, though quite short, was as follows:

I was visiting Larry Adler at his flat. He greeted me at his doorway. Yet it didn't look as I knew it to look; there was a stairwell behind me spiralling for many floors. Larry's building had a lift. Although I found this strange, I accepted the change and extended my hand towards him. The next thing I knew, I was falling backwards down the stairwell. Larry, who stayed in view throughout my fall, appeared to get smaller and smaller until he was just a speck in the distance. Then I woke up.

I didn't think too much of it, and so started my day. At the time, I was in France with my wife Tamar, and my children Elise and Simon. We were staying with friends at their home in the Loire Valley.

Later that day, while having lunch in their delightful French chateau, I received a call from another friend, Chris, back home (in London) to let me know that it had just been announced on the radio that Larry Adler had died.

Chris was aware of our friendship and didn't know if I would hear the news where we were. I was extremely upset and

also shocked by this. I had not been aware that Larry had been so ill, as I had not seen him for a while.

I then remembered the dream of that morning and was left wondering whether Larry had literally 'dropped in' to say 'goodbye'?

So how did I get to meet Larry Adler?

When I was about six years old, a cousin gave me a harmonica that nobody used. I picked it up and could play it immediately. My whole existence was taken up with this little instrument that I could take everywhere with me. At an early point I became aware of the name Larry Adler – if for no other reason that at least one of the harmonicas I had acquired was called the *Larry Adler Professional*.

That in itself is an unusual story and one that Larry was interested to hear about, along with the following:

I was born in London and at around the age of three I contracted Tubercular Meningitis. To survive such an illness in the late 1950's was in itself something of a miracle but to do so kept me hospitalised for a year. Fortunately I have no recollection of this at all. But having been so ill, and for such a long time, a check-up was essential twice a year in the form of an X-ray. On one of these visits, we had to pass a very large music shop called Squires. They sold just about every instrument going and on this particular day, I was stopped in my tracks by the sight of a mouthorgan in the front of their window. It was simply stunning; I had to have it!

When I got home that night I was so excited that I could not wait to tell my father about it. I must have been about nine years of age at the time. My father listened with great interest and then asked me what I would be prepared to do to enable me to get one. He asked whether I would kneel on the ground and kiss the floor. That seemed an odd request although at the time, I didn't question it. I answered that of course I would if it would get me the instrument. He then asked me to demonstrate that I would in fact do so. I did.

When I stood up, there on a plate (on the table) was the mouthorgan that I had seen that very morning. Imagine my astonishment! By a strange coincidence my father had also seen the instrument in a different music shop in Central London where he worked – Chappell of Bond Street. He had bought it there and then. While I was telling him about the harmonica, unbeknown to me, he actually had it in his pocket and so was able to perform this 'miracle'! I was speechless, probably for some time, and of course I was over the moon!



The Larry Adler harmonica still in my possession over 50 years later.

© Italiaander

Sometime later the head of my school, who happened to also be a musician, spotted my musical talent and called my parents in to talk. He wanted to know if they were aware that I had musical ability and if so, had they considered what they might do to help with my musical development.

After taking piano lessons for a while, I sat a music exam and became what is known as a 'Junior Exhibitioner'. This entitled me to attend a London Music College under the guidance of Dr W S Lloyd-Webber (the father of Andrew).

Since first becoming aware of, and transfixed, by this amazing little instrument that would fit in my pocket, I have been a fan of Larry Adler. So much so, that it was my dream to meet him, although there was no valid reason why this should ever happen.

I studied music, and after some years (including studies in America) I qualified as a music teacher and became involved in music as a career. However, after some time my passion for photography took me in a new direction.

I started to work professionally in my new chosen field. Some years later, I received an answerphone message from no other than a certain Larry Adler. I was both surprised and delighted to receive this call but to my extreme disappointment, it was not the Larry I was hoping to meet. By coincidence, this Larry was the agent for another musician – Peggy Seeger (the sister of Pete).

However, it was following my change of direction into photography that I first had the opportunity to meet the Larry

Adler that I had been hoping to meet.

In 1995, having just opened the Italiaander Portrait Gallery at Harrods, I was invited with my wife Tamar, to a Variety Club lunch at The Dorchester Hotel where Larry was to be one of the celebrity guests. The event was for the comedian Davy Kaye who had devoted his life to helping disadvantaged children through the Variety Club. Another guest who was there to speak about Davy was Dr Christian Barnard (who carried out the world's first heart transplant).

During the lunch, the lights dimmed, an orchestral (recording) started and suddenly Larry was performing. It was a magical moment!

After lunch, I was introduced to Larry by John Ratcliff who had invited us to this special occasion. John, a past international president of Variety and his wife Marsha Rae, (who had created Gold Heart Day which has raised millions for the charity) sang my photographic praises and told Larry that I wanted to photograph him.

Larry gave me his phone number and invited me to call him to arrange a portrait session. I did so the next day and he suggested that I drop by, there and then. Fortunately I had some free time and to my amazement I discovered that his home was a short walk from my studio in Primrose Hill. We met and arranged what was to become the first of a number of portrait sittings.

I was looking forward to having the opportunity to photograph Larry and spend some time talking about

music. I didn't for one minute expect that we would develop a friendship, but Larry often dropped by my studio. We would meet for lunch or I would occasionally go to concerts where he was performing and take some photographs. Subsequently I photographed him a number of times – in his home, in my studio and on stage.



Larry with Gary Italiaander (and sculpture by an American artist) at the home of Cindy Lass. © Italiaander

Larry's Early Life

It is not my intention to write a complete history of Larry's life as he did that in his autobiography, *It Ain't Necessarily So*, which makes fascinating reading!



Larry as a young child

(Joachim Kreck Film - und Fernsehproduktion)

But I will at this point talk about how Larry started on the road to becoming the most unique presenter of the harmonica of all time and dip into that history periodically, to give some perspective to when certain things took place.

Larry started his autobiography with an explanation of his choice of the title, pointing out that memory is open to interpretation. He did this by talking about an incident involving him, which had occurred in Germany. A few different people had recalled a story as they remembered it and all the recollections were quite different. Larry then began to question his own memory of the event!

Deciding on the most appropriate title for this book, *Reflections – A Tribute to Larry Adler*, was relatively straightforward. Just as it was, when I decided to write the book in the first place. I wanted to collect a variety of memories about this remarkable man and to create a lasting record.

At the time of writing *Reflections* it had been difficult, and in some cases almost impossible, to obtain a clear record of certain information, particularly regarding tennis. However the most important aspect, his musical life, has been documented here by those who knew him well.

For now, let's go back to 1914, the year Larry was born.

Lawrence Cecil Adler was born on the 10th February 1914 in Baltimore, USA just before the outbreak of World War 1 - a fact that he hoped someone in the future would consider to be significant.

It is fair to say, although no one would have been aware of it then, he was about to make his mark on this world.

Larry was born into a Jewish family; his parents, whose original family name was Zelakovitch, were born in Russia before moving to America as infants.



One of the earliest portraits of Larry with his parents.
From Larry's private collection c/o Marmoset Adler

As a young child, no one in Larry's family was musical, but when he was around 5 years old an uncle took him to see Rachmaninov perform in Baltimore and Larry was immediately smitten. After this, Larry was taken to see Al Jolson perform and he then wanted to be a combination of the two - Al Rachmaninov!

Larry's father ran a plumbing business and Larry would sometimes help with plumbing jobs which convinced him, whatever his future, it did not include a career in plumbing.

Larry's brother, born five years later, was named Hilliard

Gerald but was known as Jerry. He also went on to become a famous harmonica maestro in the USA like his older brother.



A young Larry
From Joachim Kreck Film - und Fernsehproduktion.

Jerry Adler

Written shortly after Larry's death in 2001, during Jerry's visit to Britain for the Memorial Concert. Jerry was also a harmonica maestro, mainly performing in the USA and on cruise ships. He died in 2010.

Now, my recollection about Larry. At the age of 10 he became the junior cantor of our local synagogue in Baltimore. He was a tyrant about mother, dad and I following the rigid rules of Sabbath. No lights in the house except for candles. We were forbidden to carry money in our pockets which, unfortunately, was not a terrible sacrifice because we didn't have any!

When Larry was 10 years old, he was walking down the street in Baltimore and suddenly passed a music store. He was fascinated by a beautiful Mason-Hamlin piano displayed in the window. He walked into the store with the assurance of a knowledgeable adult that he was seriously interested in the piano. Word has it that the salesman, in his eager desire to make the sale, promised Larry that if he was serious about the purchase, he would throw in a Hohner chromatic harmonica!

Larry eagerly ran home to inform our parents that it was his dream to own this exquisite piano. Dad was a hard-working plumber who eked out a living that bordered on poverty. He actually talked Dad into going with him to see the piano and then the salesman talked our father into making the purchase. Larry promised that he would dedicate his life to learning the piano. But if the truth be told, I believe that he was far more interested in the "free" harmonica!

When Larry decided to pursue show biz he was determined

to not break his orthodox rules on kosher food and proceeded to eat corn flakes three times a day. This went on for over three months until he began to gag on this popular cereal. Larry definitely made the break with a vengeance which included shrimp cocktails, ham sandwiches, Chinese pork dishes ... the list goes on. I can only assume that this fall from grace provided the excuse to chuck Judaism completely!

His lust for the opposite sex came at an unusually early age. Having entered the arena of glittering lights, his fascination with the entertainment business seemed to be fused with the excitement of working in theatres that included a line of very attractive chorus girls. He did lie about his age, claiming that he was 16, which seemed to have gained acceptability with theatre owners throughout the country.

His pursuit of the opposite sex was quickly out of control and at such a tender age, (14 if I'm not mistaken) he had a string of conquests that boggled the mind.

He was not particularly attractive. Short, scrawny and terribly near-sighted with his horn-rimmed coke bottle lenses that seemed to emphasize his physical deficiencies. Yet, his ability to get himself involved with the most beautiful women remains one of the great mysteries.

The ensuing years solidified his ability to find the most alluring sex goddesses which became legend. However, he has allowed some of these women to literally walk all over him with the tiresome excuse that he "didn't want to hurt their feelings." These same women were unmerciful in their desire to wrest his considerable wealth from him.



Jerry Adler

© portrait by Italiaander

In his ever-consuming desire for sexual pleasures, Larry became the easiest "mark" around. He protected the "integrity" with his ill-conceived belief that they were honest and all they wanted to do was to protect his welfare.

Larry and I were not interested in athletics so his interest in music started at the age of 12. That's about when he

became fascinated with the "mouthorgan." We are both self taught due to the characteristics of the instrument. I do not know, nor have I ever known, of a good teacher so it was up to us. We were 5 years apart in age and I was inspired by his genius and I pursued the instrument with great energy.

Larry was well into show biz when I began to teach myself so he was not around to give me pointers. I have always worshipped him as a musical genius but more so as a very loving brother.

Our father was a hard-working plumber and mother was a well-organized homemaker, adoring mother and excellent cook.

When Larry became enmeshed in the disgrace of the McCarthy hearings, it totally destroyed mother and she spent the last 35 years of her life in and out of mental hospitals.

There is no doubt that Larry was an original in the world of classical music who proved to a world-wide audience that a simple instrument, the harmonica, in the sensitive hands of a true artist, can achieve the respect and admiration accorded to musical giants such as Vladimir Horowitz and Isaac Stern. I vividly recall a rehearsal at the Hollywood Bowl where there was to be a concert with the Los Angeles Philharmonic featuring Horowitz, Stern and Adler. Larry who played the piano with some virtuosity had the chutzpa (cheek), while the audience was having a break, to start playing the piano in the presence of *musical royalty*. Horowitz said to him; "Larry, why do you continue to play that silly little instrument, the harmonica? THIS is your instrument!"

But there is no doubt that Larry's instrument was indeed the harmonica. He gave me the love, understanding and encouragement to make it my instrument as well, allowing me to establish my mark as a solo performer.



By coincidence, I have officially retired from the music business, and on November 6th I gave my final concert here in Sarasota. I plan to donate my harmonicas to a local high school. 68 years in the business is quite enough. I am now 83 and intend to live out my life in peace and comfort with my dear wife, Jean.

I have never been as devoted and as dedicated as Larry was in his pursuit of musical success. He has achieved the kind of successful heights that we all dream about. However, he paid a heavy price for it.



Larry begins his career

Eventually, it was decided that Larry would be given piano lessons. Enrolled at the Peabody Conservatory of music in Baltimore where he studied the piano, he achieved the distinction of being the only student to be expelled from the Peabody! He had prepared a waltz by Grieg and as he entered the stage the Principle said; “And what are we going to play little man”? The ‘little man’ didn’t like being referred to in this way so instead of playing the Grieg he played ‘Yes, we *have no bananas*’! Following this, his parents received a letter stating: ‘Do not send him back!’

That was effectively the end of Larry’s academic music education. A little while later, he had seen in the *Evening Sun* newspaper that a harmonica group was being formed so he went along to see what it was like. There was a man there who had been sent over from Germany by the Hohner harmonica company to form a band and teach the harmonica. Larry liked him and could see that he was a natural teacher.

After about a year of lessons, the *Evening Sun* sponsored a competition, which Larry entered and made it to the finals. The main judge for the competition, Gustav Strube, was the founder of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and while all the other boys played popular songs, Larry played a classical piece; the Beethoven Minuet in G. At the end of the competition, after conferring with his panel, Gustav stepped forwards and announced:

“Ve haf given de avord to Lorenz Cecil Aidler mit an average of ninety-nine und nine tents.” He shrugged, apologetically. “No von is pairfect.” (Larry Adler; *It Ain't Necessarily So*, 1984).

While growing up, it was a time of great bigotry and according to Larry the ethnic groups feared and despised each other and they avoided each other. He personally experienced anti-Semitism but didn't understand the logic behind what made people think that way.

Star Harmonica Artist, 15 To 'Do Stuff' at Century

Lawrence Adler, 15, City College graduate and former Peabody student, who is a harmonica soloist on the Loew's Vaudeville Circuit, will make his first professional appearance in Baltimore next week at the Century.

He was a star of the City College Glee Club and also played in many amateur events until he went to New York and made a prompt hit on the professional stage. At Peabody he was a student of piano. With the harmonica, however, he developed his own technique. One of his best numbers was Gershwin's "Symphony in Blue."

Adler's engagement here is for one week. He will then continue his tour of the Loew circuit. He is a son of Mr. and Mrs. Louis Adler, 2200 block Bryant Ave.



Lawrence Adler

(Joachim Kreck Film - und Fernsehproduktion)

Larry wanted to leave home and go on the stage and as he had managed to gather around \$50 from subscriptions of a magazine that he sold (which his parents didn't know about), he did just that. Astonishingly, at 14 years of age, he simply bought a ticket and took a train to New York. Once there, he phoned his parents to let them know where he was and they immediately went to get him.

However, he told them that if they did take him home he would simply run away again. He didn't want to go back to school or to Baltimore. His parents consulted the family doctor who said that he was a very neurotic child and therefore the best thing was to leave him alone and let him stay in New York. Larry believed that the doctor hoped never to have to see him again.

When Larry first got to New York, all he wanted to do was get a job on the stage in vaudeville. At this time the harmonica was considered to be a child's instrument. A friend managed to get him an audition with 'Borah Minevitch and His Harmonica Rascals' who were the biggest name at the time where the harmonica was concerned. Larry played the same piece that had won him the competition in Baltimore but when he finished playing, Minevitch said, "Kid, you stink"! Larry was extremely upset, burst into tears, and his first thought was to go back to Baltimore. However, once he'd had time to think, he decided to try elsewhere and managed to get an audition with Rudy Vallee who at the time was a huge star.

Vallee gave him the first opportunity to get on the stage at his night club and so Larry stayed in New York. Within a

week he landed a job with Paramount, touring all over the United States on a salary of \$100 a week in 1928, which is roughly the equivalent of over \$1,300 today. This tour gave him the opportunity to learn stage craft; in particular how to entertain an audience as he was performing up to six shows a day.

Larry had an amazing level of 'chutzpah'. Whatever an obstacle came along, he found a way to overcome it. Even when he couldn't get work or things weren't going so well, he remained confident in his own talent.

At the age of 15 he was effectively 'kidnapped' off the street by a well-known gangster who was married to the singer, Ruth Etting. He drove Larry to the studio where Ruth was creating a record and insisted that Larry be included in the recording. She tried to object but clearly that was not an option and the band, which included Benny Goodman as well as Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, agreed to put him on the record.

That same week, Paul Whiteman was playing in town and so Larry hung around the stage door and whenever he saw someone about to enter he would play in their face, hoping that someone would say 'what a talented kid' and give him a job. Whiteman's saxophone player, Frankie Trombauer, liked what he heard, led him into the dressing room and told Paul to listen to the kid.

He played a popular song and when he finished it, Whiteman said, "...play the *Rhapsody in Blue*." At 15 years of age it was technically beyond his ability but he wouldn't

admit that there was anything that he couldn't play so he replied, "I don't like *Rhapsody in Blue*."

Whiteman then turned to a young man that Larry hadn't noticed before who was sitting at the piano and said, "How'd you like that George?"

And that's how Larry met Gershwin!



Larry auditioning for Paul Whiteman - the first meeting with George Gershwin

© Illustration by Michael Italiaander