

— Herbie Hancock

A vintage, sepia-toned photograph with a scalloped white border. It depicts a woman with dark, curly hair, wearing a dark, long-sleeved dress and a beaded necklace. She is looking upwards and to the right, holding a long, thin, dark object (possibly a musical instrument or a prop) vertically. The background is a plain, light-colored surface. The photograph is mounted on a dark, textured album page.

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JAVA TO NEW YORK • TRADITION TO INNOVATION • A LEGACY THAT STILL INSPIRES



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A Canadian Diva in Java

Previously I wrote about the arrival of jazz in Batavia in 1919. What was heard until the invasion of the Japanese in 1942 varied little from the sounds of imported 78 rpm platen and from transcriptions of sheet music. However, what is little known in Indonesia is how a Canadian interpreter of Javanese “traditional” music came to be an influence on jazz itself.

Éva Gauthier (1885–1958), a Canadian mezzo-soprano, was to be the catalyst. In a diva hissy fit, she gave up on singing high opera after she was replaced at the last minute by another singer in a 1910 Covent Garden (London) production of the Delibes opera *Lakmé*. She promptly left for Java to join her fiancé Frans Knoote, a Dutchman who was then managing a tea plantation outside Bandung.

Within weeks of arriving, she was performing concerts of arias by Tchaikovsky and Rossini in Batavia’s Schouwburg Weltevreden (Gedung Kesenian Jakarta) accompanied by a local pianist and the house band.

In the months that followed, Gauthier toured Java, playing all the major concert halls and *sociëteiten* (European social clubs). Sponsorship from the Robinson Piano Company, a firm specializing in pianos built for the tropics, underwrote a tour in 1911 to Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Peking; tours to Japan, Siam, and India followed over the next two years.

Knoote then got a job with a Semarang commercial firm and it was while living there that Gauthier discovered gamelan music.

“To hear gamelan for the first time was to hear a different world—ancient, intricate, and captivating.”

— Éva Gauthier



Schouwburg Weltevreden
(Batavia), c. 1910



Tea plantation near Bandung
where Éva Gauthier lived with
her fiancé Frans Knoote.



Éva Gauthier in Java, c. 1911

Photo: Private Collection



Discovering Gamelan

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The man who provided entrance into the world of Indonesian music for the vocalist was the Dutch composer and pianist Paul J. Seelig (1876–1945), who had sat in as Gauthier’s pianist when her local pianist failed to turn up. Brought up in Bandung, he had studied composition, he d’étudie, and piano in Germany. In 1900, Paku Buwana X, the susuhunan (Sultan from 1893 to 1939) of the royal court of Surakarta (Solo), appointed Seelig as the conductor of the royal band, a position he held until 1908.

During this time, Seelig documented the royal gamelan ensemble repertoire in Western notation. He also collected Malay songs from the repertoires of *kroncong* and *stambul*, a form of trans-ethnic Indonesian folk theater, adapting them for voice and piano in a music style influenced by Debussy. Seelig provided Gauthier with a number of these song arrangements and she liked them enough to commission some more.

Gamelan ensemble in Surakarta (Solo), Java, c. 1910.



Gauthier with a wayang golek puppet from West Java, c. 1911.

“From there I went to the other cities of the island. Often on the roads, I would see groups of natives playing queer instruments, and hear them singing songs of many peculiar harmonies. I immediately became curious. Here was a music of which I had never heard! I, who had made music my life study! I inquired about these strange melodies.

— Éva Gauthier





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Membawa Jawa ke New York

Tahun 1927, Éva Gauthier berangkat ke New York City, membawa bukan hanya suara yang luar biasa, tetapi juga cinta yang mendalam terhadap bunyi-bunyi gamelan.

Ia bertekad untuk berbagi musik yang menakjubkan ini dengan dunia Barat.

Setelah menetap di Manhattan, Gauthier menjadi penyanyi yang banyak dicari baik di lingkungan konser maupun teater. Ia tampil dengan sangat khas dalam resital karya seni, oratorio, dan opera, tetapi misi utamanya adalah memperkenalkan musik Jawa kepada penonton Amerika yang membedakan karyanya dari yang lain.

Di apartemennya, ia membentuk sebuah ansambel gamelan kecil dengan menggunakan instrumen yang ia bawa dari Jawa serta beberapa bagian yang ia pesan dari pengrajin di Indonesia. Dengan instrumen-instrumen ini, ia mulai memberikan konser, kuliah, dan ceramah—menjelaskan keindahan, filsafat, dan struktur musik gamelan kepada berbagai penontonnya.

Program-program Gauthier sering memadukan karya-karya Jawa dengan komposisi Barat, menciptakan jembatan budaya. Impiannya adalah suatu hari nanti musik gamelan akan berdiri sejajar dengan orkestra-orkestra Barat di panggung-panggung besar dunia.



Éva Gauthier di piano di apartemennya di New York, mempelajari dan menyusun musik gamelan, c. 1928.

“ Saya ingin orang Amerika mendengar bunyi-bunyi gamelan yang asing dan indah—untuk memahami bahwa bunyi-bunyi itu berasal dari suatu peradaban yang sudah tua, puitis, dan disempurnakan seiring waktu.

— Éva Gauthier



Éva Gauthier bersama ansambel gamelan Jawa di New York, c. 1930.



Gauthier memberikan konser, kuliah, dan ceramah radio, menginspirasi musisi, komposer, dan penonton dengan sebuah dunia suara yang sama sekali baru bagi kebanyakan orang Amerika.



Ia juga membuat rekaman awal di New York—beberapa di antaranya merupakan rekaman pertama yang akan didokumentasikan di luar Asia.



The Concert That Changed Jazz

By the 1930s, Éva Gauthier had become a visionary bridge between East and West. But one concert in particular would leave an unforgettable mark on the history of jazz.

On February 9, 1938, Gauthier presented *East Meets West: A Concert of Javanese Gamelan and American Jazz* at New York's Town Hall. It was one of the first major American concerts to juxtapose a Javanese gamelan ensemble with a leading jazz group.

The program featured her Javanese ensemble performing traditional pieces, followed by a collaboration with the Benny Goodman Sextet. In the second half of the concert, gamelan instruments joined Western jazz in a series of experimental pieces arranged by Gauthier.

Critics were astonished. The *New York Times* called it “a revelation—exotic, enchanting, and brilliantly conceived.” *DownBeat* magazine wrote that Gauthier’s work “opened new doors for jazz by showing that the rhythmic sophistication and tonal beauty of the East could meet the harmony and improvisation of the West in extraordinary ways.”

For many musicians in attendance, it was a turning point. The concert influenced composers such as John Cage, Lou Harrison, and Duke Ellington, all of whom were searching for new sounds beyond the boundaries of traditional jazz.



Éva Gauthier with the Benny Goodman Sextet at Town Hall, New York, February 9, 1938.



East Meets West: A Concert of Javanese Gamelan and American Jazz, Town Hall, New York City, February 9, 1938.

“I did not want to simply display gamelan music as a curiosity. I wanted to create a conversation—a true meeting—between two great musical cultures. That night at Town Hall, I believe we took a step toward a new music.”

— Éva Gauthier



The concert’s success led to sold-out performances, recordings, and a wave of interest in world music across America. It helped pave the way for what would later be called “world music” and influenced decades of cross-cultural collaboration.



Gauthier’s Town Hall concert was more than a performance—it was a declaration that music could unite cultures, challenge assumptions, and inspire a new world of sound.



Several selections from the concert were later released on 78 rpm recordings by the American Anthropological Association and remain among the earliest documents of gamelan music in the Western world.



Legacy of a Trailblazer

Éva Gauthier’s life was a bridge—between continents, between musical worlds, and between past and future. Long before “world music” became a term, she was living its truth.

She showed that gamelan was not a museum piece, but a living, evolving art form. She proved that collaboration need not dilute tradition—it could illuminate it.

Her influence reached far beyond the concert stage. Composers, ethnomusicologists, and artists around the world built on the path she had opened. Many who studied with her in New York went on to become leading figures in their own right, carrying forward her spirit of curiosity and respect.

In later years, Gauthier continued to write, lecture, and mentor. She remained deeply connected to Indonesia, returning often, supporting musicians, and encouraging the next generation of Javanese artists.

She passed away on August 21, 1958, in New York City. But her music—and her vision—live on.



Éva Gauthier with a Javanese gamelan ensemble, c. 1940s.

Éva Gauthier was one of the first to carry gamelan music from the courts and villages of Java to the concert halls and universities of the West—opening ears, minds, and hearts to a music that continues to inspire the world.



Éva Gauthier, c. 1940s.

“Music does not belong to one people or one place. It is a language of the human spirit. When we listen with respect, it teaches us to hear not only new sounds, but new ways of being.”
— Éva Gauthier

HER LASTING IMPACT

-  Pioneered the introduction of Javanese gamelan music to Western audiences.
-  Created collaborations that helped shape the early “world music” movement.
-  Documented and arranged gamelan repertoire for study and performance in the West.
-  Mentored generations of musicians, composers, and scholars.
-  Built a bridge of understanding and respect between cultures that continues to inspire.

“Éva Gauthier was ahead of her time in every way. She was an artist, a scholar, a diplomat of music, and above all, a woman of deep integrity.”
— Dr. Mantle Hood, Ethnomusicologist

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ADDENDUM

Sources & Historical Notes

This publication is based on historical research, archival documents, newspaper articles, concert programs, and published scholarship.

Historical photographs and documents have been reproduced where available.

Some illustrations have been created using AI-assisted imaging to represent historical scenes, people, or settings for which suitable archival photographs are unavailable.

These illustrations are intended to complement the historical narrative and are not presented as documentary photographs.

In Memory of Terry Collins

IMAGE KEY



ARCHIVAL PHOTOGRAPH

Original historical photograph from archival collections, museums, and libraries.



HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

Original documents, program materials, and newspaper articles from the period.



AI HISTORICAL ILLUSTRATION

AI-assisted illustration created to represent historical scenes, people, or settings for which no known photographs exist.

RECOMMENDED READING



Matthew Isaac Cohen
Éva Gauthier: Java to Jazz
(2006)

The definitive biography of Éva Gauthier and her pioneering role in bridging Javanese gamelan music and Western classical and jazz traditions.



More than thirty historical recordings of Éva Gauthier are available online through major streaming platforms and educational archives.

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Éva Gauthier with gamelan instruments, c. 1930s.



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