

Coney Island History Project Oral History Archive

Interviewee: Ellina Graypel

Interviewer: Julia Kanin

<https://www.coneyislandhistory.org/oral-history-archive/ellina-graypel>

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Julia Kanin: This is the Coney Island History Project. My name is Julia Kanin. And today we're talking to Ellina Graypel, a poet, a musician, and a composer. Hello, Ellina!

Ellina Graypel: Hello, Julia.

JK: Tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do.

EG: I'm very pleased to have you in my world, in my apartment on Coney Island, the area that I love very much. And thank you for having me on the Coney Island History Project, too. People don't think they are part of history because we all have a story. When I was a child, I realized that I probably will not be able to live without art, without music, and without creativity. And that's where I'm all in. I've lived all my life in this world of art, creativity. I was on stage from the age of three. And I can't make it without a stage.

JK: Tell us about your childhood. What was it like? How do you remember it?

EG: My childhood was my childhood. I was born in Russia, but oddly enough I have never been there. My parents were visiting my grandparents. And I was born on the Volga, near the city of Saratov. And I probably stayed there for a couple of days, and that was the full extent of my Russian life. And we went to Belarus. My early childhood began in Belarus. My formation as a musician and as a composer started there. Once I was asked to write a song (we were already living in Minsk at that time). At that point, I was already writing songs. I began writing songs very early, and somehow, they immediately received appreciation and became famous. And I became the host of several television programs on the Belarusian television. And one day I was asked to write a song for a movie. There was a director Lyudmila Shevtsova. I was about fourteen years old, I badly wanted her to like it so she would take my songs for the movie. And I wrote something close to fifty songs for her! So at least she'll like one. And, indeed, she liked one song that was called "The Road To Home." This movie received the grand prix at the international festival in Yalta. And my song was played all over this region of Eastern Europe. I was thrilled. So that's how I became famous as a child. And then my parents moved to America, and I moved with them. Of course, I knew I had to find myself in art in America. I gave my first concert in Russian. People came and listened to me. But they cried. And I was young, and I always thought... people cannot cry from my art! Art should not bring tears. Art should bring joy, understanding, empathy, but not tears. They cried because they felt nostalgia. They were older or elderly people. And I told myself that I would no longer write in the Russian language, but I would come with my art to an American audience. And here I am.

JK: When did you feel you first wanted to do art and how exactly did you start?

EG: I have an amazing story. Like everyone else, I have an amazing story. As a child, I didn't like anything about music. I didn't like art; I didn't like anything. All I wanted was to play football with the boys. It

entertained me. I didn't want to read; I didn't want anything. And then one day, I remember it like today. My mother was a teacher of Russian language and literature. And every teacher, they don't hear well. Their hearing... there was a constant school bell ringing. And it affected her, and so the TV in our house was very loud. And I was standing alone outside. Suddenly I heard music. This music touched my heart for the first time. I raised my head and saw the stars. It was Beethoven. It was Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. I saw the stars, I heard this music, the loud music. It went through my heart to the point that I began to cry. I never cried! I fought. I was a troublemaker, a tomboy, a kid who was running with the boys! But at that moment, I was just crying. And that's it. And from that moment on, I got obsessed with music.

JK: How old were you?

EG: I was eight. I went to music school. I didn't like the piano, so even now I play the guitar, the harp. Of course, I play the piano, I write for piano. But I always chose stringed instruments.

JK: How many instruments can you play?

EG: Oh, who knows, asking a musician how many instruments she plays is like asking a gourmet what his favorite food is! Got it? *[Laughs]* Somehow everything is being played in our hands. Not very good, really, but it is being played.

JK: What role did your parents play in your work – in the success you achieved, even while still in Minsk?

EG: My parents, my mom, and my dad, would gather in the evenings. And they would sing Ukrainian songs. They were both from Ukraine. It was so beautiful! They would split them in vocal parts. These quiet Ukrainian folk songs. And that's when my love for folklore began. So, my parents made my heart love what is probably pure and sincere. My music started with them and with Beethoven began my true love for art.

JK: When did you move to the U.S. and where did you first settle?

EG: We moved in the '90s. And we lived in St. Louis, Missouri. It's an amazing city. I started performing my programs there. At the time, it was more country music. It was how I developed. When I was eighteen years old, my friend, the owner of a music store, called me and said, "Ellina, come here! You have to come with me. I have to introduce you to someone." Well, when you're eighteen years old you go anywhere with anyone! Naturally, I went. And so, we came to a club called Blueberry Hill. We went backstage. I was already cool at that time because I was invited backstage. I was already such a prominent musician in Missouri. And an elderly man was standing with his back to me and there was also his son. And then the old man turned to me, gave me his hand, and said, "Hi! My name is Chuck, Chuck Berry." The one that wrote *Go, Johnny, Go!* The one that made my very first style *rockabilly*, which I will keep in my heart forever. The one who agreed to look at me, at that little girl, as someone serious.

JK: At that time, did you perform exclusively in English, or did you also perform in Russian?

EG: At that time, by the age of eighteen, nineteen, twenty, I was performing only in English. I didn't have a Russian program. The Russian program, as well as fine Russian language, emerged much later, when I was already in New York.

JK: How hard was the transition from one language to another, because I understand how important it is for a creative person - it's a different syntax, a completely different structure of the language. How did you take it?

EG: When we're young, we don't think about languages. We don't think about anything. We think how to start chatting. You have to chat with your peers. We sat at school and chatted. I didn't care who to talk to because I love to chat. So, I didn't have a problem with language perception. God has given me the gift to speak many languages. It's very easy for me. I'm a musician. I have a good ear for music, and after hearing some languages for a sufficient amount of time, I just get them. This happened to me with other languages, and it also happened with English.

JK: How did you move to New York?

EG: It's a story!

JK: Tell us!

EG: I had a tour with Borders Books and Music. I signed a contract and was touring all the cities in America. We were in Chicago; we were absolutely in all cities. And I had to come to New York. My concert was scheduled on September 13th, 2001. It was a concert at Borders Books and Music at the Twin Towers. Naturally, my concert didn't happen, and was moved to another venue, also Borders Books and Music, also in New York. I came to New York, and I saw people. And I saw the tragedy in their eyes. I saw the fear. I saw the pain. The gloom; the city was burning. And the gloom of people's feelings. Fear, dreadful fear. And I understand that my mission as a musician is to dispel this. My mission is to be close. And I finished a concert. It was *my* concert. I made people smile. It was wonderful! People came up to me and said, "Gosh, thank you. You gave us a sense of normalcy. You made us feel that there will be something good. You have given us a sense of joy in life. Thank you for this joy." And then an amazing story happened to me. A woman came up to me and said, "I know you're Russian. I know, I feel that you are Russian. Of course, you speak English. Yes, you sing in English, but I know that you are Russian. Do you not have a Russian repertoire?" And I then said to myself, "Probably, there are others for whom I want to write songs in the Russian language." The time has come when I would be understood. And people will cry from my songs only if I put tears in there. And if I put joy in there, they will rejoice with me. And I can have like-minded people. And I came to these like-minded people later, and now I give some concerts entirely in Russian.

JK: You mentioned in one interview that you had to relearn Russian.

EG: I was losing my Russian. If you live for years... you live in American society, you work in American society, you meet American people. If you communicate in English everywhere, then English dominates your life. What language are we going to think in if all thoughts are in English? English. And Russian certainly didn't dominate my life. It was hard for me. It was hard for me to create that poetry and speak as it was necessary. So, I came to Coney Island, found a Russian environment, found Russian jobs, side jobs, hustles, found Russian friends. And, of course, I went to college, studied Russian language more. I studied Russian poetry, grammar, which I wasn't good at. And, of course, my mom.

JK: Are you performing more in English, or Russian, or both?

EG: In both languages. I often try to translate American songs into Russian, so the Russian audience understands what it is about. Why the author put his talent, his genius into this song. Leonard Cohen and his song Hallelujah. I translated it into Russian because people need to know. And, of course, I did exactly the opposite: I translated Time Machine (*note: Russian popular band founded in 1969*) and brought it to an American audience. I translate Belarusian songs because people need to know that there are other

cultures out there. And I bring these cultures to the country music audience, to the people who have never heard what Russia is, or have heard only the negative side of Russia, or have never heard what Belarus is, and have never heard the music of these countries. This is what I do at my concerts: different songs, different translations, in different languages, along with my songs by Ellina Graypel.

JK: What inspires you the most?

EG: Oh! It's a very difficult question. Everything! Now I am glad speaking with you, and I will have a wonderful feeling, and this feeling is probably called inspiration. I'm even... I can never understand what inspiration is. It's something that probably pleases us, makes us move. Inspiration can be either bad or good. But it always makes us snap back to reality and move on. So, I don't know what inspires me, but there is something magical going on in this life. Magic.

JK: When did you move to Coney Island, and to the Sea Gate area?

EG: When I came to New York, I wanted to be in Brooklyn. I need an ocean, I'm a romantic. I have to be here, I have to be with seagulls, I have to be where romanticism is. Where is the romanticism? Coney Island. These are all the buildings, our constantly lighted streets. This light, it's a small light of a very big city. It's a light that is like a pure heart, like those Ukrainian songs that my mom and dad sang. It's a different folklore. It's a different music. It's a city within a city. Coney Island is a small town in a big city that is distinguished by its completely different saturated light. Here's another reason why I'm here. I once dreamed of performing in Carnegie Hall. I dreamed about it because when I came to New York, I got there after my concert. My concert was in such an informal bookstore, so I looked completely informal, and walking next to Carnegie Hall I was asked: "Do you want a ticket?" I haven't even thought about it, "Twenty dollars? Why not? Carnegie Hall! Handel, Messiah! Why not?" So, I ended up at Carnegie Hall. And when I got there, I knew, I almost felt Tchaikovsky. I listened to this great music. I saw the acoustics of Carnegie Hall. I knew I wanted to play at Carnegie Hall. It was my big dream. The concert ended. I was in tears, having listened to Hallelujah. And I left this Handel concert. And one part of the audience headed to one door. And I and a small group of audience went to another. I looked completely informal, and left my guitar at the coat check, and I walked, walked, walked, walked, walked, walked, walked. It's like in an old anecdote: How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice. How do you get out of Carnegie Hall? It was pretty hard. And so, we were going down, down, and all of a sudden there was a closed door in front of us. Naturally, we opened that door, our small group of people. And we found ourselves at the backstage of Carnegie Hall. It was an absolutely amazing feeling when people of different nationalities had just played Handel. And we happened to be among them! I looked informal, so they took me for a helper from the stage. And I helped carrying musical instruments, and I felt absolutely amazing. And in 2016 I was invited to at Carnegie Hall. And I knew I wanted to perform with my program at Carnegie Hall. It was the most meaningful concert of my life. I created a program in 2016 called Bohemian Night at Carnegie Hall. I invited my friends, ethnic musicians from all over the world. And I thought, Lord, who would go to such a program? Who would be interested in it? I was afraid that I would enter this famous Hall, and there would be no one there. Because every musician often thinks this way. And the day before my concert, my manager called me, and he said, "Ellinochka, I'm sorry, but we don't have a single ticket and we can't accept your passes." "How can that be? We invited people," I said. And he replied: "It's a sold-out show." And that's how I sold out a show at Carnegie Hall. And Carnegie Hall, they said that I am welcome anytime I want to play there. It's a great honor for every musician. New York has made me that happy.

JK: What was your first impression when you first saw Coney Island?

EG: I didn't see it, I felt it. And here I stayed. I didn't go anywhere.

JK: So, there weren't any specific sights, or anything... Maybe you saw the ocean?

EG: The ocean was mine. Boardwalk. After all this summer, 2020, when musicians couldn't play, I had to perform for people. I saw what was going on. It was a nightmare! And our mission, just like it was on September 11th, we went out and played, played, played. We played for police officers when they felt sad. We played for the older people who needed to breathe that fresh air. We did what a normal musician does: we brought beauty.

JK: Do you often perform in Coney Island?

EG: Yeah. I always perform at least once a month at a bar, here at a local bar called Anyway Cafe. It's not quite Coney Island, but yes, here in Brooklyn. I'm a big supporter of Brooklyn businesses. I think it's necessary, and I'm happy to help them. Everyone. Brooklyn needs to develop here. It's *our* Brooklyn that needs to develop.

JK: How do you see Coney Island in a few years?

EG: You know, I envision changes. I feel them. I envision large houses that are built next to our small ones. I know there will be a *ferry*. And people are preparing for all these changes. But I really wouldn't want Manhattan to come to us. I really want it to stay homey. Coney Island is homey. Well, I feel these changes, I see them. Well, we'll see, we'll see. Any change is something new. So, it's always exciting. It is always, always joyful to see something new happening in life.

JK: What is your mission as a musician, as a composer, as a poet? Can you talk a little bit about that?

EG: Big question. Very big. I think I've already touched on it in a lot of ways. It is to be where you need to be. Be *the first responder*. Because the first thing a person needs is a sense of life and beauty. A sense of rightness and kindness, warmth, and understanding. This can only be reproduced by sound. Something that a human ear perceives one hundred percent. Words are words, but music is the right vibration of the right energy. It's something that makes music *music*. My mission is to be. To be who I am today and going forward. And to be the one who I am at the moment and always. And to be the one, who I am to others, if they need it, of course. People don't need too many of us. People need to have enough of us.

JK: Has your style of performance changed compared to how it used to be and now?

EG: Sure, absolutely. I'm always looking for something new. I like different styles in music. Here's more. We, musicians, are often hired to perform in different musical genres. It means I work in the genre they want, or in the genre in which I work now. My style has certainly changed because I'm experimenting. I'm always looking for something new. But the mission and the goal, and the feeling... I'm going for it, and I'm going like this. I always remain true to myself. But the search for other genres, other styles is always interesting. That is, yes, it has changed, but the goal remains the same.

JK: And tell us a little bit about your creative plans for the future.

EG: I'm on tour right now. We are touring. Yesterday we came from the Poconos. Today is my day off. On Wednesday we're rehearsing. Next week we're going to Baltimore. A week later we're going to perform

in New Jersey. In a couple of weeks, we're performing in Atlanta. Then we go to Sarasota, and St. Petersburg, Florida. And we are coming back to New York on Halloween. I play a Halloween concert in our Brooklyn Anyway Cafe. Then we are going to Miami. We always have plans. We will come back to New York in December. We tour. The musician should always ... We are enticed by the journey. We travel.

JK: Has the pandemic affected your creative process and your touring, as we understand that it has affected probably everyone?

EG: It affected everyone. And, of course, first of all, I got really sick. It was very tough for me to go through this pandemic. And I understand how hard it is for people. I really understand, the pneumonia and everything... I understand that. Of course, everyone was affected financially, morally, and emotionally. Everyone. And when I recovered from this illness, I really wanted to help others. And even though it affected us, well, maybe, maybe it made us better. Those who could have gotten better, it made them better. Those who got worse, it made them worse. During the pandemic we've all faced ourselves. And it depends on us what these lessons we have learned, so to speak.

JK: Interesting to know how you survived Sandy. Were you already living here at that point? How did it all happen?

EG: It was probably the biggest shock I have ever experienced, with the loss of my car, with the fact that we were flooded, and we couldn't get out of the house. It was very scary. Very scary. My cat is now afraid of water. And I understand how powerful the force of the ocean is. Going back to that conversation about inspiration, I wrote some of my saddest and painful songs. My heart was crying over it. It was a pandemic in a way that happened unexpectedly. It's scary. It's something we're never ready for. It's what we see in bad dreams. But after having survived it, again, we faced ourselves. What's next? Where are we? How are we? We understood that we are constantly walking on a razor's edge. After all, we live by the ocean. But we live by the ocean. We now know exactly what we may encounter. And it's our choice whether to live here or not.

JK: Were you here during Sandy? Or did you evacuate after a while or before?

EG: Unfortunately, we didn't evacuate. And we were in the middle of it. And I tried to get people out of the water because we have, thank God, second floor. The car was totaled of course. Then I would help people get down (because I was living on the second floor at the time). It is very difficult to talk about what happened, but thank God it's in the past. And thank God Sandy is behind.

JK: Ellina, tell us how you got the Woman of Distinction award?

EG: I guess, New York thanked me for serving people. For doing concerts all the time during this pandemic. We did concerts online. Thousands of people watched, commented, New Yorkers wrote, expressed their gratitude, even sent us money because they knew how difficult it was for us then without our concerts. And so, they reached out to me with appreciation.