

Hubert Roussel: “Extra, Extra. Read All About It!”

By Don Looser

Just a scant memory ago is the era when legendary journalist and television reporter Walter Cronkite began his career in 1932 as a high school cub reporter for the *Houston Post*.¹ Before the advent of television, the newspaper was the primary purveyor of daily information and the chief molder of public opinion. Only newspapers had the multiple layers of news journalists, syndicated columnists, arts critics, fashion editors, society reporters, gossip columnists, and sports writers to compile a comprehensive, qualitative product on a rigid daily timetable. Multiple updated daily editions kept the news current. The newspaper was the heartbeat of the city.

In downtown Houston, news runners for the *Houston Press* raced to beat the 2:00 p.m. deadline for the evening edition to best the *Houston Chronicle*. Cronkite described the *Post* city room “littered with the wadded remains of ... rejected leads. The air hung heavy with smoke. The din was frightful as the deadline approached and typewriters *clacked*, linotypes *clinked*, and telephones *clanged*.”² Houston was blessed with a wealth of spectacular writers including O. Henry, Hubert Roussel, George Fuermann, Leon Hale, and future novelists David Westheimer (*Von Ryan’s Express*), Larry McMurtry (*Lonesome Dove*), and William Broyles (*Apollo 13*).

Early in the twentieth century, Houston boasted three newspapers with distinctive personalities. The oldest, the *Houston Post*, was founded in 1880 by Gail Borden Johnson.

The legendary *Post* journalist Marcellus E. Foster established the *Houston Chronicle* in 1901. With gains from the Spindletop oil boom, Foster also founded the original *Houston Press* in 1911. The *Chronicle*’s erudite editor Zarko Franks called the pugilistic *Press* “the jazzy old lady of

Texas journalism.” In downtown Houston, one could buy a newspaper on virtually every street corner. The sassy, no-subscription *Press* “tattled, slugged it out with the high and mighty, harassed faith healers, and loved kids and dogs ... She screamed headlines, and never ignored a fight at the Cork Club.” Columnist Wanda Orton observed, “Everyone loved the old *Houston Press*, although not everybody would admit it.”³

The counsel of the *Chronicle*’s scholarly Zarko Franks seemed to permeate local journalism, “Write it tight, but don’t sacrifice the lover’s sigh, the laugh, the tear.” The *Post* boasted the eccentric, Latin-reading, piano-playing philologist Hubert Mewhinney. The *Houston Press* featured Sig Byrd’s column “The Stroller” that lent dark, Runyon-like prose about Houston’s inner-city underbelly. *Press* readers also relished Maxine Mesinger’s column “She Snoops to Conquer” with her “showbiz lingo” reports of *swankiendas* and *playcations*. Moreover, the

cultural scene was fostered by a cadre of gifted journalists—Wille Hutcheson, Ina Gillespie, and Hubert Roussel.⁴

In the period from 1928 to 1966, Hubert Roussel was the man whose contribution was so monumental that it virtually



The *Houston Gargoyle* publication was “fondly remembered for its enlivening of the local scene.” This cover is from vol. 3, no. 9, March 2, 1930. Photo courtesy of the Houston History Research Center, Digital Archives, Houston Public Library, bk0045-272b.

defied measurement. Roussel was born in 1897 in Houston after his parents left behind the seat of their French ancestry in Louisiana. He was educated in New York City and served on several magazine staffs there, absorbing the city's literary style. He returned to Houston in 1928 as an associate editor of *The Houston Gargoyle* magazine, successfully modeled after the sophisticated *The New Yorker*.⁵ Much of his early journalistic attention focused on the lively Houston Little Theatre where his wife, Dewey, was president. Roussel then worked for the *Houston Press* from 1932 to 1937 and later served with "unchallenged distinction" as critic of music and drama at the *Post* from 1937 to 1966.

For Roussel, culture was a profession. He became a legend among Houston journalists for his acerbic wit, his bold advocacy for cultural progress, and his eloquent writing. Roussel's colleague George Fuermann described him as a "brilliant, opinionated, wispish, crotchety jack-of-all-critics." Fuermann viewed Roussel as "a generally dour gentleman whose other talents included one of the most facile journalistic styles in the South and a temperament that was never introduced to indecision." Novelist David Westheimer wrote, "He was a brilliant critic of films, the stage, ballet and music... wise without being smug, incisive and witty, with never a wrong or wasteful word." Roussel's wit could pen such an alliterative theater description as "rosy, ribald, and raffish," then in turn summarize a concert by the Houston Symphony guest conductor Modest Alloo as "Much Alloo about Nothing." After a concert by the Metropolitan Opera diva Helen Traubel, Roussel lamented, "Nobody knows the Traubel I've Seen."⁶

During most of his career, Roussel reviewed virtually every downtown performance. His prickly columns appeared promptly in the paper the next morning. Historian Walter Rundell, Jr. observed, "To a large extent, the Houston audience was educated by the columns of Hubert Roussel. The

Hubert Roussel.

Photo courtesy of the Alley Theatre, Houston History Research Center, Houston Public Library, 792.0976414 A435.



success of great music in Houston must take into account his *signal* contribution." On days when there was no concert, his concert reviews frequently took the form of imaginary conversations with Fleecie, the "goddess of the cigar counter," in the Rice Hotel lobby. Fleecie represented what Roussel thought the average concertgoer might have felt about the last night's program. In one review concerning contemporary repertoire, Fleecie reported that her friend said the orchestra didn't play anything familiar. The more she heard, "the more she felt dizzy inside, like listening to Liberace, but worse."⁷

Roussel's wit was sharp and to the point. After a production of *Faust* in which theatrical flash powder mistakenly ignited Faust instead of Mephistopheles, Roussel labeled it "A Victory for Satan." He once admonished, "You have to play a symphony to be one," and later, "This reporter has never encountered a rendition of any work that sounded *less* like Beethoven wrote it." Roussel observed that one Alley Theatre production "... could have left no one doubtful of its hold on insignificance." Moreover, he chronicled what he labeled as André Previn's "temperamental afflatus."⁸

Leon Hale recalled, "The *Post* had truly literate people like Donald Barthelme and Hubert Roussel. Unknown to him, I became Roussel's student. I studied every sentence he wrote. I thought it so wonderful he could compose those soaring reviews of symphony concerts and, in the next breath, produce one of his light pieces on Fleecie. For me, a cup of coffee with people like that was a continuing education." David Westheimer remembered, "Roussel was my first boss. From my first day he taught me how to write a story— 'just put one little word after the other.'" What appeared to be Roussel's facile gift of expression, however, was the result of his uncompromising refinement. Colleagues reported that Roussel's wastebasket was always full of discarded versions of his prose. "His columns were painfully wrought but seemed effortless." Donald Barthelme recalled, "When 'Mr.' Roussel wasn't happy with [an associate's] article, he'd punch a buzzer on his desk summoning George Christian or me for a harsh scolding." So intense was his commitment to language that he once filed off the comma key on the typewriter of an assistant whom he accused of its overuse.⁹

Roussel's praise was equally powerful. He could glorify with the headline, "Stokowski Opens Season with Triumph"



Dewey Roussel, left center, helped establish the Houston Stage Canteen, "a cabaret for enlisted service personnel in uniform" (1942-1946) located in the former Auditorium Hotel, now The Lancaster. Also pictured: actress Fay Bainter, center; Hubert Roussel, far right; and Dr. Reginald Platt at left.

Photo courtesy of Michaelene "Miki" Lusk Norton.



In 1955, Marian Anderson became the first African American to sing a leading role at the Metropolitan Opera. In 1963, she gave the last concert in Houston's City Auditorium before its demolition.

Photo © Yousuf Karsh, karsh.org.

or "Britannia Rules Again: Barbirolli in Charge." He could also express his own intimate feelings. After a concert by the regal contralto Marian Anderson, Roussel wrote that she had given him "... the thrill of a lifetime. I cannot explain Marian Anderson. Hearing from the dark woman who stands tall and immobile ... yet throbbing with the passion of human inspiration ... is the most dramatic experience I have had in 30 years of attending the theater." For Miss Anderson, Edna Saunders broke historical precedent and seated African American guests on the main floor of the City Auditorium. Houston's mayor sat with Edna Saunders in the African American section. For Anderson's visits, Saunders personally housed the famed contralto who would enter the Saunders home only through the back door.¹⁰

Roussel's eloquence was surpassed only by his love for the city of Houston. Roussel leveraged Houston's civic pride with his oft-voiced rivalry with his Dallas counterpart, critic John Rosenfield of the *Dallas Morning News*. He observed, "Dallas has a burning appreciation of its own virtues and a short view of the undertakings of others." Roussel pleaded for higher levels of support for the arts from city officials through budget allocations but observed, "The only time I've ever known a city official to attend a Houston Symphony

concert was when it took a visit by the Duke and Duchess of Windsor to cause that."¹¹

Roussel's personal friendships with the formative philanthropist Ima Hogg, the impresario Edna Saunders, and the oil magnate Hugh Roy Cullen gave wings to his advocacy for cultural advancement. Roussel's public role as a critic coupled with his personal friendships with the city's cultural leaders was enhanced in an era when both could be used to great effect. It was as if Roussel had a press pass to the city's social aristocracy. Roussel mastered the art of creating public pressure for change on those who could afford to pay the cost, while simultaneously conveying to the general audience the cultural sophistication of Houston's social aristocracy.

Hubert Roussel exercised strong advocacy for his firmly held convictions. It was his position that the development of local talent was a better long-term investment than importing talent for performance. He consistently pressed for better pay and a longer season for the local Symphony musicians. Roussel lamented that the Symphony musicians were the 'cheapest skilled-labor' in the Houston job market. In 1940 he wrote, "These people are not relief cases. They have stayed on a diet of canned beans and uneatable big talk. Some players are making only \$50 a month for a limited season, others less." Symphony musicians at the time were dependent on additional jobs ranging from dance bands and pit orchestras at local movie theaters to farming. Had it not been for such continuous employment provided to a core of professional musicians, it is doubtful that a symphony of any distinction would have developed at this stage in the city's history. Roussel challenged the idea that support for the arts was the sole responsibility of a handful of wealthy individuals who often considered the arts their personal possession. In 1947 he wrote, "A city becomes great when it learns to invest in things of the spirit for the benefit of its whole citizenship."¹²



Majestic Theatre Musicians, 1930.

Photo courtesy of Cecil Thompson Studios, Houston Symphony Archives, MS03.0008.

Roussel's campaign to improve or replace the City Auditorium as the principal performance venue was constant. Caruso and Toscanini had performed there and vowed never to return. Conductor Efrem Kurtz "would gladly have dynamited" the facility. Roussel campaigned that the City Auditorium was "less impressive, clean, and comfortable than a shotgun movie theater." He wrote multiple satirical columns about "Sascha," the City Auditorium rodent, who professed a profound predilection for music by Russian composers. City councilman S. A. Starkey suggested that if the City Auditorium rodents could not be eliminated, then they should be required to buy season tickets.¹³ Roussel's career-long campaign for a quality performance venue was finally achieved in 1966 when the City Auditorium was replaced by Jones Hall for the Performing Arts.

Roussel wrote during a period of whirlwind change in Houston's development in art, drama, theater, dance and music. Westheimer affirmed, "Roussel's efforts, as much as anyone's, contributed to the flowering of the Houston Symphony and made [Houston] into a haven for ballet where the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo spent its Christmas breaks."¹⁴ Many Ballet Russe dancers stayed with Houston families during the holidays. From these associations, Roussel's daughter Stephanie studied with Maria Swoboda at the Ballet Russe school and later became active in Houston theater productions. Roussel's younger son Peter enjoyed a career in government including as staff assistant to President Gerald Ford and deputy press secretary to President Ronald Reagan.

Roussel's personal friendship with Houston Symphony board members enabled many of his visions for greatness to find funding. He had Miss Hogg's ear though they did not always agree about Symphony matters. His friendship with Edna Saunders was easy and mutually beneficial. In 1917, Saunders had been given responsibility to book the City Auditorium calendar with cultural events and had maintained a virtual monopoly on guest artists and cultural attractions visiting the city until her death in 1963.¹⁵

Roussel was often a catalyst for progress. In June 1940, he received a letter suggesting a series of summer symphony concerts at Miller Theatre in Hermann Park. Ernst Hoffmann agreed to conduct without pay and to arrange for an ensemble if a donor could be found for a \$1,500 guarantee. When the Houston Symphony declined sponsorship due to budget constraints, Roussel wrote several columns pleading for a donor. Ultimately, an anonymous donor came forward, later revealed to be the entrepreneur N. D. Naman who also helped organize the Houston Philharmonic in 1928.¹⁶

The first free concert was set for August 21, 1940, during the frightening early days of World War II, when Britain began bombing Berlin. Houston had no history of a similar concert undertaking. Attendance was uncertain. "But by 7 p.m., all roads leading into the park were choked with cars. When the concert began, police estimated the audience



Houston City Auditorium, 1928.

Photo by Milton Lawless
courtesy of the Houston History Research Center,
Houston Public Library, MSS 0334-0486.

spread before Miller Theatre to be 15,000. Nothing like it had ever been seen at a concert of orchestral music in Houston," Roussel later reported. Significantly, these Miller Theatre concerts have continued each summer since 1940.¹⁷

At his best, Roussel's eloquent tributes were unsurpassed. Speaking of Stokowski's recording with the Houston Symphony, he wrote of the Hovhaness *Mysterious Mountain*, "The mystery is that it should be so simply, sweetly, innocently lovely in an age that has tried so terribly hard to avoid those impressions in music." In 1955, Roussel wrote an intimate eulogy upon the tragic highway deaths of his revered former Houston Symphony conductor Ernst Hoffmann and his wife. While serving as Symphony conductor, Hoffmann had recruited and often personally housed and fed musicians. He had brought in acclaimed soloists, established student and pops concerts, and initiated radio and military base concerts funded by Hugh Roy Cullen. However, in 1947 the Symphony Executive Committee summarily terminated Hoffmann. Roussel later recalled, "Hoffmann made it an orchestra. His tireless efforts saved the orchestra in the World War II years. He arranged and conducted the first orchestra tour and the first summer concerts without pay. But despite his request, Hoffmann was never invited back to conduct ... The Hoffmanns were good people; they were greatly loved. Now [suddenly] they are gone."¹⁸

Even more poignantly, in 1944 during World War II, on what would have been the twenty-first birthday of his son Cpl. Hubert Roussel, Jr., he shared, "He went to his death for what he loved, as thousands of other typical American boys have done ... In a sense, they were all my boys; I have wept for the others as I have wept for him, but we cannot repay them with our tears. We can only resolve with all the fury and fire in our souls to win the victory for which they died."¹⁹

Hubert Roussel retired in 1966 only months before the grand opening of Jones Hall, a performance theater for which he had lobbied throughout his career. He summarized

his years and many reviews in his 1972 book, *The Houston Symphony Orchestra, 1913-1971*. However, Roussel's vast writings on theater, ballet, and visiting artists are preserved only in his daily columns. Carl Cunningham, Roussel's successor at the *Post*, observed "... his book is a beautifully written book, flowing with simple dignity, side-splitting humor and memorable touches of sadness ... Roussel the critic stands plainly and honestly in the shadow of Roussel the historian."²⁰ Cunningham has continued to document the city's artistic journey with his three additional Houston cultural histories in the *Rousselian* tradition.

Hubert Roussel arguably had a more profound influence on Houston's cultural destiny than any other subsequent individual. His daily columns recorded in virtual detail the history of Houston's cultural life from the 1930s to the 1960s. Remarkably, only thirty-five years had elapsed between the Houston Symphony's 1931 rebirth and the opening of Jones Hall in 1966. Roussel's retirement marked the culmination of Houston's years of struggle toward musical maturity—just as the opening of Jones Hall heralded the dawn of a period of cultural abundance. With the power of his press, Roussel advanced a path based on civic pride. He led elected officials, culture managers, and corporate executives to respond to his vision for greatness.

Hubert Roussel died on May 11, 1980, at the age of eighty-two. In tribute to Roussel the man, David Westheimer shared, "There never was a gentler, more sensitive friend or more loyal colleague."²¹ As an Army veteran from World War I, Roussel was buried in the Houston National Cemetery. His tombstone reads simply, "Pvt. US Army." In tribute to this extraordinary citizen of Houston, Roussel's honorary pallbearers included future President George H. W. Bush, Lt. Governor William P. Hobby Jr., General Maurice Hirsch, future Secretary of State James Baker III, George Fuermann, David Westheimer, and Walter Cronkite.



Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo
Program, 1942-43,
with cover by famed
Broadway designer
Boris Aronson.

Photo courtesy of
Don Looser.



Ernst Hoffmann, 1955.

Photo courtesy of the Indiana University Archives.

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In the 1960s, as television news coverage morphed from the rich treasure of written journalism such as Roussel's, the United States became informed by such television giants as David Brinkley, Barbara Walters, and Tom Brokaw. Instant satellite reporting, sound bites, and video recordings replaced the more extended style of *written* journalism that preceded the days of television news. The news, now, was to be *viewed*. None other than England's Prince Phillip Montbatten keenly observed, "Whatever they print is bound to be out of date."²²

With the advent of television and social media, the Pew Research Center reported that newspaper jobs nationwide declined from 71,000 to 31,000 positions. Most newspapers did not survive. Between 2005 and 2021, some 2,200 news dailies across America went out of business. Many of the rest cut local reporters and news coverage, shrank the paper's size, dismissed feature writers, or stopped print editions.²³ In Houston, both the *Houston Press* and the *Houston Post* ceased publication.²⁴ **HH**

Don Looser, Ph.D., is the author of *Music in Houston: 1930-1970* (<https://digitalcollections.rice.edu/documents/detail/53016>) and *An Act of Providence: A History of Houston Baptist University 1960-2010*. His local history articles have appeared in *The Houston Review: History and Culture of the Gulf Coast* and the *Houston History* magazine. Dr. Looser is the retired Vice President Emeritus at Houston Christian University and a devoted researcher of Houston's cultural history (dlooser@hc.edu).