

FRIEDA BELINFANTE

"I feel very lonesome if there's nobody that I can help and love and protect. And I don't understand people that can only live for themselves. I can't understand it. Where do you get your happiness, where do you get your satisfaction? What do you do with your life?"

Frieda Belinfante was born in Amsterdam on May 10, 1904. A cellist and a conductor from a musical family, she was the first woman in Europe to be artistic director and conductor of an ongoing professional orchestral ensemble. She was a lesbian, and through her father she was also half-Jewish; she adamantly insisted that neither of these labels defined her.

When the Nazis occupied Holland, she set aside her flourishing career in music to become active in the Dutch underground, working with her friend Willem Arondeus. The resistance group's primary duty was forging official documents that allowed Jews and others being hunted by the Nazis to flee the country. When the Gestapo began to suspect documents were being forged, members of the group bombed City Hall's population registry in order to destroy official records that could disprove forged documents and reveal the location of Jews who were living in hiding. Through this effort, the identities of hundreds of Jewish residents were destroyed and, as a result, they were saved from being sent to death camps. Though she was involved in the planning, as a woman, Frieda was not allowed to directly participate in the bombing in order to not arouse suspicion.

After the bombing, Frieda disguised herself as a man for three months, disguised so effectively that even her own mother did not recognize her. Eventually she escaped Holland with the help of various countries' resistance networks. When she arrived in neutral Switzerland, she was arrested by authorities and eventually placed in a refugee camp. In the camp, she offered free cello lessons to spread happiness through music.

After the war, she returned to the Netherlands, where she was disappointed by her perception that individuals who had fought were given little credit while those who did nothing seemed to be succeeding. Because of this, she emigrated to the United States in 1947. In 1954, she founded the Orange County Philharmonic Orchestra in California. Unfortunately, popular preference for a male conductor and rumors about her lesbianism contributed to her dismissal from the orchestra in 1962. Fifteen years later, Orange County would finally acknowledge her contributions by declaring a 'Frieda Belinfante Day.'

Frieda died in 1995 at age 90 of cancer.

A former colleague said: "She was feisty, indefatigable, single-minded. But more than anything, she really cared about music, and she wanted to share the art with a broad-based community. She can be credited for starting an extraordinary tradition for quality music."

(On discussing her experience as a lesbian with others):
"No, I never even mentioned it. Because it doesn't make any difference to me. I have always met every human being like an equal. I think a human being is a human being, however he is born is how he is born and has to live with it."

