

If you were to see Mardi-Ellen Hill walking down the streets of her Brooklyn Heights neighborhood on one of her many long walks to the library, or see any of the images of her taken during her performing days, her angelic singing voice would not be a surprise. Her fine features and slight build might seem a bit at odds with the power of her voice, but the fact that she once comfortably lived in the performing world would make perfect sense; her regal composure seems to fit any stage. As with any superficial inter-action, however, you might stop there and think you know all there is to know. It would be a case of missed opportunity in the truest sense of the phrase, for only when you meet Mardi do you get the full picture of her unusual mix of abilities. You would have no hint of the personal strength she's built, through tremendous challenges. You'd also miss out on the fact that she operates with considerable left brained focus and determination, and holds the genuine status of trailblazer. Speaking to her would test your mental dexterity in a good way. Her quick-fire mind, comfortable with a wide range of subjects would keep you on your toes. However, her creativity, geniality and self-deprecating sense of humor, delivered with a slight Brooklyn accent, would quickly put you at ease. And if you took the time, you'd get to know one of the most interesting reinvention and business success stories never told.

The essence of Mardi's story can be found in what Henri-Frederic Amiel once said - "You desire to know the art of living, my friend? It is contained in one phrase: make use of suffering." Some her most significant

accomplishments have their roots in that idea, but hers is not a tragic tale. What you find, rather, is perseverance, creativity and industriousness, driven by a desire to make peace with the past and make something good of it. Long before the challenges we currently face thrust a new urgency upon us, Mardi-Ellen Hill was looking forward to what could be. She channeled personal obstacles and dramas, that would be at home in a Dominic Dunne novel, and her innate musical and mathematical abilities, into a development that may one day sit with Google, DVR's and social networking in the history of technological innovation and new business models. She has done so through economic cycles similar to what we see now, single-handedly raising over \$1 million to complete her work. Her cross media invention was first introduced through the literary and entertainment worlds where she comfortably lived for several decades. Its broadest launch to date will start there as the applications Mardi has created are a ready fit for re-energizing the common book, film and marketing model. Her work has also been widely identified as having long term educational possibilities that could reach a much broader range of industries and audiences.

Mardi's creation is very much an inter-active "work of art". Beginning in 1986 with a poem she wrote in response to one of several terrorist bombings that were being carried out in Paris, she composed a piece of music. The first composition was then developed into a full stage production entitled "[Vaugirard](#)". It was widely viewed and praised both in the US and abroad and won two National Endowments for

the Arts. It was hailed at the time as “unabashedly lyrical”, “telegraphic and allusive” and “visual, sensual and sub-contextual”. Building on the stage production, particularly the music, and several autobiographical elements, Mardi went into further depth by writing a five book series entitled, “[The Spell of Vaugirard](#)”. It is a captivating epic mystery/ thriller, spanning the fifth century to present day, that uses Mardi’s compositions as a key plot device. Recognizing the continued appeal of movie going and the upswing in its value during particularly stressful times, Mardi completed the creative aspects with a screenplay, “The Trick Palace”, based on one of the books from the series, “[The Skeleton Score](#)”. As an entry into the world she built, the script garnered the most immediate attention, but the innovative way in which she has connected all the elements of her work is what has gotten media industry heavyweights taking a very close look.

Unlike many artists (composers, writers or non-tech business people for that matter), Mardi also possessed the skills to complete the package by personally developing a unique interactive platform, called [MEND™](#) or “Music Encoding Device”. A fictional version has a vital role in the plot of her books, helping to unravel the central dilemma. It uses the same musical elements that have been present since she first conceived the poem. The idea is expanded through Mardi’s clever programming expertise – her mathematical side coming out again. As the audience engages in each element through the overarching story, they continue through each stage with the aid of their personal MEND

toolbox. They are able to participate in the story and have individualized interaction with the characters. This innovation redefines how an audience connects with a story. Its possibilities are as infinite as the different individuals who could use it and the places they may be found. Unlike more traditional marketing approaches that get “bottoms in seats” but often leave the audience with barely a memory of how they just spent 90 plus minutes, Mardi’s invention makes them want to engage further. The MEND device helps the film and book characters uncover their story. Mardi takes it out of the story and offers the same to the public; not unlike giving every reader or viewer their personal, fully-working *transporter* after seeing “Star Trek”.

Moving in stages from the literary and cinematic contexts, the audience is lead to an on-line navigation platform that uses an encrypted music CD as a navigational tool. Again Mardi was ahead of the curve, taking this natural next step long before studies showed that 70% of people admit that they incorporate on-line technology into their lives daily<sup>i</sup>. The film and book series continue, as yet a new stage is set. With the web interface, the now, user, unwittingly becomes part of the book and screen saga in a more game-like interaction – coming up against the main characters and their inventive strategies to keep their power and secrets. It is a format that could be rolled out immediately for any number of similar projects. It also presents the publisher and film-maker with a unique marketing opportunity, taking their audience through an

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<sup>i</sup> Online Publishers Association

interactive maze that also introduces a storyboard of products, media and merchandise.

From any interaction you have with Mardi, it is immediately clear that only her unique combination of abilities and history could have produced such a thing. The fact that she began life as a dual mathematical and musical prodigy goes some way to explain this. Her equal ease, and interest, in the world of mathematics and science is still evident in the way she speaks. Phrases such as “the MEND infrastructure will work the entire global route using the “car” as it hooks to the remote signals in the hotel elevator” are just a common in her causal conversation as “what’s for dinner?” without being intimidating or off-putting. Her love and connection to music is maintained in her weekly participation in her local church choir. Her business acumen has moved her project from a notion decades ago, to a fully operational entity, primed for greater scaling. Her highly keen, creative writer’s soul produced an engaging saga through the use of the language of music, and tools of mathematics and technology.

The fictional story at the heart of Mardi’s work is as good as the platform she’s invented to tell it. It centers on the members of a great musical dynasty, the Barrington’s. They have a secret power and are locked in a dark struggle to keep it. The family members are not simply exceptional musicians and vocalists, but have a genetically encoded ability to communicate, derive and maintain power from the Earth in the form of a song that only they can hear and

decipher. In the film treatment, we find the current generation in a scramble for life and death. Over the course of several generations part of the secret to their unique ability was lost. Its origins, recovery and stable handover become their quest. Its discovery is in fact crucial to the Barrington’s continued power position and survival, as well as that of the world. Like the audience, no one character knows the entire story. To aid in their search the family creates a device, named MEND, that reads, decodes and compiles each member’s “notes” to complete the family’s song and locate and control what was lost.

Mardi’s personal story is shared through the original music, characters and events that mirror some of those from her own life. They are not immediately evident as they are encoded and embedded in each piece – a mystery to be unraveled like that of the Barrington’s. Without knowing exactly what they are, a viewer or reader is still privy to the world she once inhabited with her family of prominent lawyers, astrophysicists and political operatives. The fictionalized Barrington family plays out a similar battle for power and ownership that also steals elements from real life. Primary settings such as New York, Washington DC and Paris are places where Mardi and her family members once and still reside. They anchor scenes in the story, provide historical notes and literally influence the readings of the MEND device for the characters and the audience.

The music may be the most significant link of all, however. Although it started out as one of

her first loves and obvious talents, it ultimately played a larger role in her life; remaining a constant companion during times when life did not seem as promising as today and providing the most original aspect of the entire work. As it plays a crucial role in saving the Barringtons, it was, in many ways, essential to saving Mardi. Without revealing all, Mardi shares this too with her audience.

Mardi-Ellen Hill is a 21<sup>st</sup> century story teller and inventor that has created something equally suited to the web, Barnes & Noble, the local multi-plex or a featured talk at TED. In the near future, it may be found in all of these places. Hollywood and the publishing industry have readily recognized the unique quality of what she has created and rightly see it as an answer to some of the challenges they currently face. They have also seen the uniqueness of the woman and her story, and how it can change the way we experience art and the person behind it. Mardi has conceptualized and almost single-handedly built a new media platform. She has pushed the boundaries of what is known as inter-active media while delivering an exceptional piece of storytelling.

### *About the author*

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