# One hell of a show

## Margo Tufo is back to the business of music

BY LYNN THOMAS

Etta James calls her "Little Spike," and everyone else calls her the "white Etta James." No matter what you call her, don't miss her act. Margo Tufo and her fabulous band appear every Monday night at Portland's Candlelight Café, and she also appears June 15 on the Unity Stage at Portland Pride.

Born and raised in San Francisco in the middle of the Haight-Ashbury, Tufo has fond memories of "laying in the park listening to Janis Joplin, Jefferson Airplane" and other rock 'n' roll greats of the era.

She had begun singing in the church choir, but, even as a young girl, she had a booming voice that was considered too low for traditional soprano and alto ranges. They wanted her to sing in a smaller, higher voice to fit in with the rest of the girls.

Tufo came to believe her natural voice just wasn't acceptable. She learned the guitar and sang a bit, but the real turning point came when the then-14-year-old went to hear the Paul Butterfield band. As she listened, there came this miraculous sound. A woman's voice—low, growling, full and singing the hell out of the blues. Big Mama Thornton (who was known for dressing in men's clothing) let her know everything was gonna be all right.

So Tufo got herself an electric guitar and put together a band.

Tufo has always had very eclectic musical taste. Early on she sang Baez and Dylan but was influenced by blues, jazz and R & B.

She did the folk circuit thing for a while and—it being San Francisco in the early '70s—played many of the same clubs as Cris Williamson, Teresa Trull and Linda Tillary.

Around the age of 20 Tufo says she "married a high school pal and had a kid" while continuing to play. A little later she gave it all up for a "34-year-old femme from St. Louis." Being a young mother and working clubs until 4 a.m. doesn't always jibe, so Tufo eased out of music for a while. She got a job with a phone company and became the "first female installer on the planet."

But the musician's muse kept knocking, and she eventually hooked up with Terry Baum, one of the creators of Dos Lesbos. The pair put together a musical comedy act called "Baum & Tufo" and hit the Midwest. They toured for quite a while on the comedy circuit before ending up in Portland.

Tufo loved the area and in 1985 created the ill-fated Blues Sisters. It was a "lose-lose situation," she confides. "Lesbians didn't want to hear the blues, and blues clubs didn't want lesbians."

She decided to expand her horizons and recreate her sound by putting together the best musicians she could find, she says, "regardless of gender or sexuality."

Although, she smiles, there's no mistaking the fact that she's a "big ol' butch dyke," she believes "music is the melting pot of everything. It's about coming together, not about separatism." But, make no mistake, she injects her songs with the pronouns that are appropriate to her life. When she sings a love song, you know it's being sung to a woman.

In 1993, while on tour in England with her all-guy band, the male driver of their van developed a major crush on Tufo. He kept wanting to get naked. "What part of 'No thanks, I'm a lesbian' don't you understand?" she laughs.

Tufo deliberately hires band players from different genres, noting she likes the sound the meshing of styles creates. They're "heavily R & B," she states, "with jazz and blues on either side."

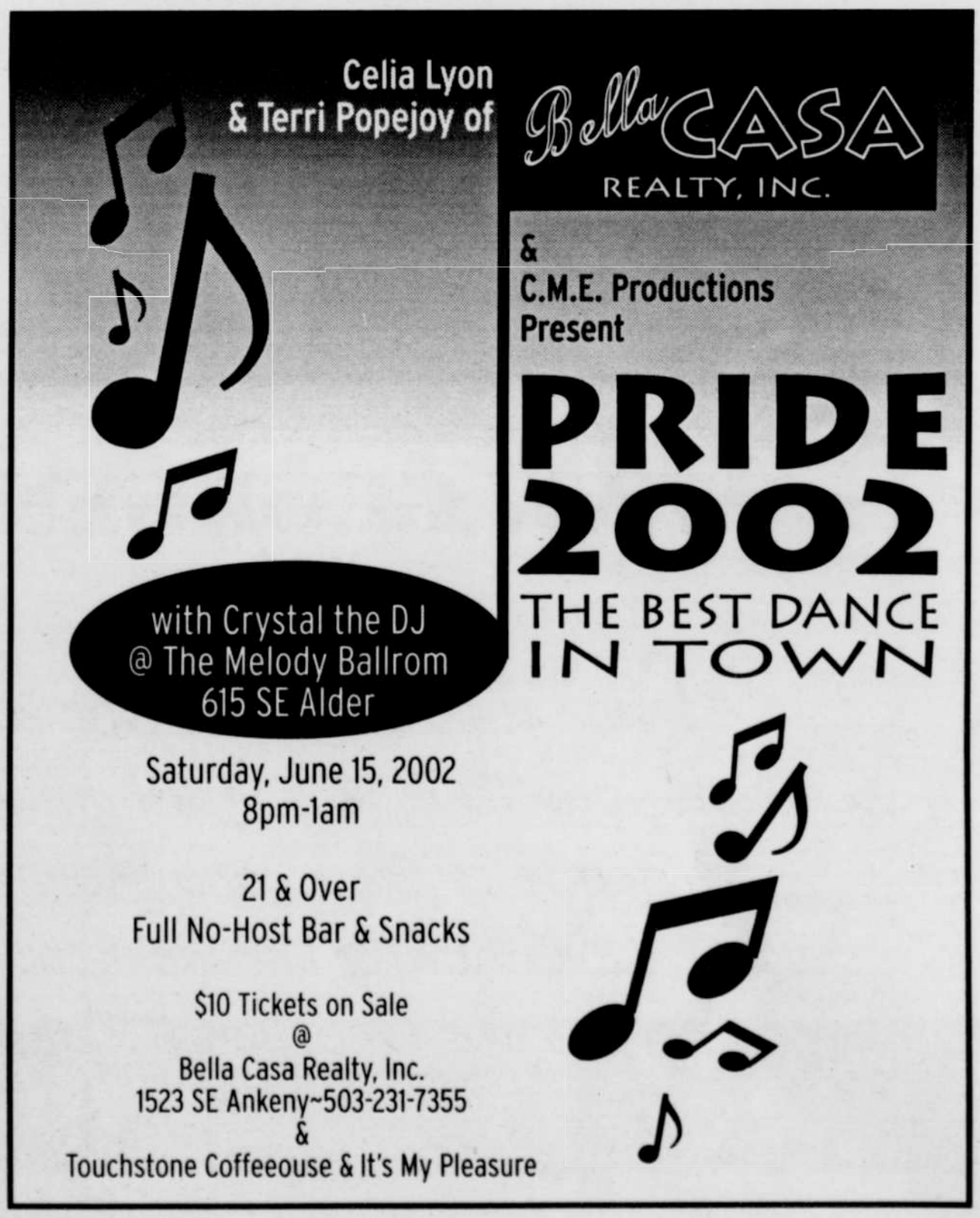
The 1993 CD *Live at the Candlelight* is a tribute to this decision. A must-have for blues fans, the recording of Tufo and her complete ensemble includes a full horn section and was nominated for the Muddy Waters Award for Best Blues Album.

Her 1991 album *Still Crazy* was also nominated for that prestigious award, and the band was nominated four times in the Best Blues Band category. Tufo herself was the first recipient of the Muddy Waters Award for Outstanding Female Blues Vocalist in 1991.

The blues dyke contributed to the Portland-area music scene for 10 years before burnout sent her packing back to San Francisco. She's just returned to the Rose City after six years off, which she spent in the Internet industry and caring for her dying mother.

Now, reunited with some of her old band members, Tufo is back at the Candlelight where, she says, you can find one "hell of a show."

**Margo Tufo belts the blues June 15 at Portland Pride**

*The* MARGO TUFO BAND *performs at 7:05 p.m. June 15 on the Unity Stage at Portland Pride. It will also be part of the July 4 Waterfront Blues Festival. The band appears 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. every Monday at the Candlelight Café, 2032 S.W. Fifth Ave.*

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