

DARLING OF THE NORTH COAST

"I met Sam Cooke and his wife Barbara, and he turned to her and said, 'Why don't you bring her to America with us? We like her,'" **Norma Fraser** recounts, bursting into laughter.

Fraser has lived in Eugene for a decade and has a lifetime of stories like this, including recording with Bob Marley.

Fraser's parents didn't even know she could sing until they heard her song on the radio; they wanted her to be a doctor. She didn't plan to be a singer, much less a reggae legend, not singing a note until she was 14.

Her rise to fame in '60s Jamaica during reggae's golden era was spawned by youthful rebellion: sneaking out. Fraser would tuck a change of clothes into her bag and ride her bike to see whatever American artist was playing in town.

In 1961 she first recorded with Clement "Sir Coxson" Dodd, the legendary reggae producer. Her dreamy 1964 duet with calypso artist Lord Creator called "We Will Be Lovers" topped the charts for more than a year.

"I was the big cheese, you know? And in Jamaica, they played it over and over and over; it was a hit over and over and over," Fraser says.

By the time she was a teenager, Fraser had already garnered two nicknames: Darling of the North Coast and Golden Voice. She was performing regularly in resorts and headlined her own show. She calls this time of her life "the best, best, best."

Norma is a small woman, but talk to her for five

minutes and she has the biggest presence in the room. She speaks in singsong: Her music from the '60s has an uncanny resemblance to her speaking voice 50 years later. Her energy makes it impossible to pinpoint her age. When I ask, she laughs.

"If you want to die early, ask a Jamaican woman her age," she says. "If I feel like dancing when I'm 99, I should dance!"

In 1970, Norma came to the U.S. and performed with various bands. Ten years ago, she came to Eugene. She found comfort in the city's laidback ethos, which reminds her of Jamaica.

Be sure to catch Fraser while you can — she performs about three shows a year, saying she prefers to do fewer shows of better quality. She says she doesn't want to work often, make more money or be "in the in-crowd."

"I've been there," she says. "I want to smell the trees now, and the river. It's so quiet here. I like that."

Norma Fraser performs at the Democratic Party of Lane County holiday party 9 pm Friday, Dec. 18, at Old Nick's Pub, 211 Washington Street; \$10. — *Sophia June*





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