

## "Million Dollar Grandma"

by Bob Lothian

Mary Lockridge, "The Million Dollar Grandma and the Millionaires," played in front of nearly a thousand people during her concert at Pioneer Courthouse Square on the day before the Fourth of July.

There's no secret about the kind of talent that draws crowds like that—Lockridge has been moving crowds with her soulful renditions of jazz standards, spirituals and "torch songs" for all but 6 of her 70 years.

"We play soft jazz," said Lockridge, somewhat modestly downplaying the feeling in her music.

Backed by Eddie Weid on piano, Kevin LeBaron on saxophone, Nick Christmas playing drums and Dan Davis on bass, the group puts out a contemporary sound that spans the years.

When "The Million Dollar Grandma and the Millionaires" play next at Art Quake, Friday, September 20, from 8-10 p.m., music lovers won't want to miss this class act.

Lockridge, a lifetime Portland resident, traces her roots way back in Oregon. Her grandfather, Sergeant Major David H. Haskins, was a "Buffalo Soldier" of the famous 10th Cavalry before settling and building a house in the Metzger area of Southwest Portland.

Mary grew up in that house, where her mother, Ida Haskins, recognized her singing talent at a tender age.

"My mother told me just go out and do it . . . and I'm still performing," Mary said.

Her dream was to become an opera star, but the Great Depression hit and there was no money for training in Europe. Mary exchanged sewing for singing lessons with a well-to-do lady in Southwest. Busts of Beethoven, Chopin and Mozart still grace the top of the organ in Mary's apartment near Portland State University.

Mary became a child star of the West Coast vaudeville circuit, playing in the string of Orpheum theaters in larger cities. She remembers the first song she ever sang on stage, at age six—"I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles." She also remembers the train trips with her mother and the sound of gravel striking the fenders of her father's model T Ford as they drove over the early roads from show to show.

She stayed with vaudeville until it gave out before World War II and then entertained in clubs. Her career took her to the Orient, Canada and Mexico, but not the East Coast.

"It was just wonderful meeting all the different people," Mary said. She rattled off a jazz who's who—Art Tatum, Lavanda Page, Della Reese, Sammy Davis, Jr. and many others.

She remembers with fondness the time she sang accompanied by Tatum. "Nobody could touch him on the piano—if you couldn't sing, he'd make you sing," she said.

Della Reese—"She's the one that taught me how to pack my bag." When Reese and Lockridge performed at nearby clubs in Portland, the two met. Reese gave her a tip, Mary said—that she could roll up instead of fold her gowns and dresses to eliminate wrinkles and save room in the suitcase.

Mary also performed with Sammy Davis, Jr., "when he was just a kid," she said. "I was about 15, he was eight or nine."

There was also the special time she took her four-year-old son Reginald to meet Louis Armstrong in Portland.

"He was so warm," Mary said. "He let (Reginald) hold his horn, and this was a big thing for my son."

Mary said it was "almost a no-no" for a young girls to go into show business in those days. She also experienced prejudice, but not among entertainers, who she said were accepting and open-minded.

"It was very difficult for you to maintain your status in society," Mary said. "But if you believe in yourself, you hold your head up and carry on. It's been a life I would not change."

Between performances in her busy career, Lockridge managed to find time to raise six sons and three daughters, who have blessed her with 25 grandchildren.

Not the only member of her family drawn to the stage, Mary's famous brother, Eddie Rochester Anderson, traveled the vaudeville circuit and became the irreverent butler of the "Jack Benny Show." Lockridge and Anderson grew up separately, and didn't spend much time together, she said.

Among Mary's favorite numbers are "torch songs—sad songs that tell a story," she said. One is "Blue Prelude," which she hopes to record soon. Her other favorites include "Danny Boy," Rogers and Hammerstein's "You'll Never Walk Alone," and spirituals—"Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," "Nobody's Seen the Trouble I've Seen," and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

Mary said she feels gratified to see an audience respond to her music. Sometimes they even cry, she said. She especially enjoys entertaining senior citizens. Her message to them is, "They can do something . . . whatever it is you did when you were young, you can still do."

What keeps her singing is seeing the lift it gives people, Mary said. "If it's only for a minute, you lift people out of the depression by making them feel good, making them laugh. That's what's happening, really, all over the world."

Now Mary sees her role as passing on her musical knowledge to young musicians while continuing to make her audiences feel good. With the band members, "I taught them the value of the music and what it means. We're not a bang bang bunch of noise. We express feeling, that's what jazz is all about."

### YMCA Sponsors Family Fair

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Her music is also about soul, Mary said. "Soul is not black, soul is feeling. I don't care what nationality you are, when you're singing with feeling, you're singing with soul."

Her plans include an album, possibly a video. "I don't intend to grow old," she said.

But she worries about her grandchildren and the state of the world reflected in the music of today.

"All their music is so drastic and heartbreaking, there's no softness to



Mary Lockridge—The Million Dollar Grandmother.

Photo by Richard J. Brown

it . . . they're saying something, but it seems violent. I think that's why it's so loud . . . they're really crying out to be heard."

"I can understand why they're doing it, because they feel they have no future. Too many kids feel they have no future, so why should they strive for one? But if a doctor told me I was terminally ill, I would fight it. Who are you to tell me I'm going to die? I want to live," she said.

In addition to her responsibilities as a performer, Mary volunteers at O.A.S.I.S., Older Adult Services Information System, a meeting place and referral agency for senior citizens on the 10th floor of the Meier and Frank Building. Mary is at O.A.S.I.S. on Wednesdays from 10 a.m. - 3 p.m.

## Concert and Sing-Along Bring Couch Park Series to a Close

The "Tuesday in Couch Park" series draws to a conclusion on August 19 with a concert and sing-along led by the thirty blended voices of the Portland Rose Close Harmony Music Men Choir. They will entertain in Couch Park, 20th and NW Glisan, from 7 to 8 p.m. At 6 p.m., preceding the music, people are welcome to bring their own picnic and a package dessert for sharing. Coffee and lemonade will be provided.

The major focus of the "Tuesday in Couch Park" series is to encourage neighbors meeting neighbors and to provide positive recreational activities in the park. Co-sponsors are Metropolitan Learning Center Community School, Northwest District Association, Northwest Ministries, and Nob Hill Business Association.

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