Showstoppers: When Local Women Entertained Pittsburgh Audiences

By Bette McDevitt
In 1997, when the Pittsburgh Musicians' Union was assembling a program booklet to honor women in music, a young man in the office was mesmerized by the glamour shots being gathered. "How about a few phone numbers?" he asked Anne Feeney, president of the union. "These pictures are 50 or 60 years old, for God's sakes!" she replied. The young man was lost in time. It would be easy to do.

These beautiful women who wore slinky dresses trimmed with ostrich feathers, or fishnet stockings and a little satin costume, turned more than a few heads in the 1940s, '50s and '60s. They sang for us, played for us, and dazzled us in the decades when people went to clubs and hotels to be entertained. And they called their own tunes, no small thing for women when our "place" was in the kitchen. They set the pace — until television dropped the curtain on the golden age of live entertainment.

Once when Regina Peterson walked through the crowd playing accordion at the Top of the Towers in Gateway Center, a child whispered, "You're leaving a trail of your feathers." It was to be a prophetic moment.

The women left a trail of feathers, glamour, and glitz at the Ankara, the Copa, the Holiday House, Vogue Terrace, the Concordia Club, the University Club, the Twentieth Century Club, the Duquesne Club, the Top of the Gateway Towers, the Roosevelt Hotel, the William Penn, the Fort Pitt Hotel, and the Pittsburgh Athletic Club. They also played in the homes of the Hillmans, Mellons, and the Scaifes in Ligonier, at country clubs, and at hundreds of small clubs throughout the region.

Patti Faloon, a singer and dancer, liked those smaller clubs: "We called them 'the animal clubs' — the Moose, Elks, the Eagles, and so on. Those were our training fields. I was just a nice little dancer, singer, and they treated me wonderfully. None of this stuff that goes on now. You don't know where to tell people to go to learn how to walk on stage, how to take a bow. I learned..."
by doing it." Faloon worked as a secretary only long enough to save money to buy costumes and hit the stage at the age of 17. She performed on the John Reed King Show on TV, one of the first live shows. Her husband Marty Faloon and a guitarist performed on early television with the Baron Elliot Orchestra.

Marty took a day job to support the family, but Patti Faloon (who used Fallon as a stage name) and her partner Anne Slone (stage name Cindy Dunn) stayed with the stage as they raised their families. "We had an agent, Sid Marke," recalled Patti, "who took us to audition for the Ed Sullivan Show. One of Sullivan's people wanted us to go on the road for a year, but we turned it down. I didn't regret it, because we kept working. We only went out of town if we could come home that evening."

Faloon liked to ad lib with her audience. "One evening, I called a man out of the audience to participate and told him to put a lei around his neck and he said, rolling his eyes toward his wife, 'Oh-oh, I'm gonna get it!' and I came back quick, 'Oh no you're not!'"

Gloria Siegle-Spiegler, who majored in piano at Carnegie Mellon – Carnegie Tech in the 1940s – has been able to make a living playing and composing music in Pittsburgh, from show tunes to classical, though she admits, "You have to be kind of crazy to be in this business."

Harold Cohen, former drama critic for The Pittsburgh Press and Post-Gazette, called her "Miss 88." Newspapers referred to her "rippling musical genius." Musical satire was her niche, using classical forms and modern content as in her Studies in Be-Bach. "Maybe it does people good to feel they are slumming musically. I've done things that Chopin would probably hate me for, but I think it's important to appeal to the largest number of people."

She began performing in the late '40s at socialite teas in Sewickley and played some of Pittsburgh's hot nightspots – the
Hollywood Show Bar on Sixth Avenue, the Red Door near Market Square, and Stouffer’s Gaslight Room in Oakland. Another was the Monte Carlo near the Joseph Horne department store, playing for a live radio show whose theme song was *Sophisticated Lady*.

Gloria also played at the Riverboat Room in the William Penn, and returned to the Terrace Room for a long run in the 1980s. By then, the hotel had purchased Andre Previn’s grand piano. “Sometimes, after it was tuned, I felt that I should pay them for allowing me to play. That piano was so cooperative,” Gloria said.

Regina Peterson often teamed up with her violinist friend, Mildred Anderson, whose stage name was Jean Patterson. In 2002, Anderson, with a glint in her eye, recalled to Peterson, “Remember when we played on a block of ice, wearing rhinestone covered bathing suits, and Kaufmann’s loaned me a pair of glass slippers?” The ice was topped with an inch
of insulation material, made by the Koppers Company. The point was to show that the material kept those two hot numbers from getting cold — and to catch the eye of passers by.

Anderson, trained as a classical musician, played both piano and violin. In 2002, she and Peterson were still getting together around a piano to sing tunes like the bluesy *St Louis Woman* without missing a beat. Peterson said she owes Anderson a lot: “Jean taught me to remember we were professionals. One time she went to a house to perform, and the person who came to the door told her to ‘go around to the back door.’ Jean got in her car and went home.”

When Peterson put aside her accordion a few years ago to become a real estate agent, her late friend, Joe Wallace, former Pittsburgh Symphony bass player said, ‘You won’t like it, Regina. It won’t be fun. It won’t be like going to a party’

The party lasted until television seduced us into staying at home. “It chewed us up and spit us out,” says Faloon. Peterson concurs: “It was all those guitars and amplifiers and Elvis Presley who did me in. When I was in Las Vegas, I wouldn’t go across the street to see his show. But,” she admitted, “when I went to Graceland, I was impressed with his accomplishments at such a young age.”

The fun began early for Regina Peterson, with a vaudeville road trip at age 17. Some Army and Marine bases were on the route: “At Camp Lejuene, there were 6,000 Marines, and the applause was deafening. I decided this was for me.” She auditioned for the USO, the United Service Organization, which organized entertainers to perform for the troops in World War II. The audition was at the Villa Madrid on Liberty Avenue, where the Copa was later located. “It was the worst day of my life,” Peterson recalled. “There were all these USO executives taking notes, and I had to perform before my peers. Well, I didn’t get halfway through the song when they said ‘That’ll be enough.’ I thought I was not being selected and nearly died, but then they said, ‘When can you start?’!”

In August 1944, Peterson went to Europe with six other entertainers: “There were two Irish American comedians doing vaudeville jokes, a juggler who threw hats out in the audience that came back like a boomerang, one singer, and a dancer. I had to play for each one of them, in addition to doing my own act.” After a stop in Iceland, the troop performed in hospitals in England, with buzz bombs dropping all around. “Here we were with young men who had no fingers, no hands, and we had to sing *Just Let a Smile be Your Umbrella*. It was hard, very hard.”

Torpedoes whizzed by as the troupe crossed the English Channel to France, then on to Germany behind the advance of the Allies. After the Nazis surrendered in May 1945, Peterson signed up for another six-month tour of duty and went on to Austria and Czechoslovakia. When she returned home after the war, Peterson and Jean Anderson both worked for KDKA radio personality Ed Schaughency, who also had an entertainment agency. As well as doing stage performances, Anderson, her sister, and their cousin formed the Pittsburgh String Trio and played on KDKA.
Delsey McKay, who grew up in the Hill District amidst music, followed her own beat: “My father played stride piano, like Fats Waller and Art Tatum, at a little place on Smallman Street called High Booties, but he couldn’t read a note.” Music was her destiny and she wanted to be able to read and compose it. Her determination led to a masters degree at Duquesne, advanced study at Julliard, and a career that went from Pittsburgh to New York and Europe. “All my life, I heard music in my head, and I wanted to be able to write it down.”

Her resolve also sprang from the racism and sexism facing a young African American woman at that time: “If I had my degree, how could they shut me out?” she reasoned.

Although McKay did not have the support of the establishment, she had some stellar personalities rooting for her. “I was 16 when Duke Ellington came in to perform at the Savoy Ballroom above the Granada Theater on Center Avenue. My agent, Lee Matthews, who was also a Pullman porter, had to go on a trip that day and he asked me to be the Duke’s escort. After the performance, I played his music and he encouraged me to compose my own music.”

Errol Garner, who grew up in Pittsburgh and attended Westinghouse High School, also offered encouragement: “He had short legs and little stubby fingers, and he said if he had hands like mine, he could really play. I told him, ‘Hey, you’re going to get a smack, you know,’ because he was one of my idols. He had this great left hand. Errol couldn’t read a note of music but if he heard anything, that was it.”

 McKay’s first appearances were at the Saturday amateur programs at the Granada Theater. “I developed a dance routine to the Duke’s music. I was a contortionist and could twist myself all around and then I did a little trucking, or the Susie Q, at a fast tempo.” That routine brought Delsey her first break at the age of 17: Lonnie and Claire Fisher, a husband and wife vaudeville team, caught my act. Lonnie was a tap dancer, and Claire was a singer and pianist. They asked my parents if I could go on the road with them. We worked the Italian American clubs and the Elks clubs, and they brought me home every night. Then I went on the road with them in tent shows in Altoona, Lock Haven, Steubenville, and through West Virginia. I started out in tights with my contortionist acts, and then I took off the tights, and danced in a brief outfit.

What Delsey really wanted was to play the piano. She got her way at the Casino vaudeville theater across from Kaufmann’s in downtown Pittsburgh. “They asked me to do my act, and I told them I would, with one condition, that I play the piano. So first I danced, then they rolled out the piano.”

Her first professional gigs as a pianist were at The Clock and Cicero’s, two restaurants in Oakland. She performed at the Horizon Club at the airport, the Sportsmen’s Club, in the small clubs in the area of Court Place, and even political fundraisers at downtown hotels: “I was still

Below: Mildred Anderson and Regina Peterson demonstrating Koppers insulation at Greater Pittsburgh International Airport, early 1950s.

Opposite page: Marty Faloon, Regina Peterson, and Adam DiGaspari perform at the William Penn Hotel, probably in the 1950s.

Bottom left: Gloria Siegle-Spiegler, late 1970s.

Bottom right: Jean Anderson and Regina Peterson with Regina’s granddaughter Nikita, 2002.
dancing and singing, whatever I was called for. I had three children by that time, and I was helping my mother to raise eight children. My father had walked out on her." She had a long stint at the Bradford Hotel in Bradford, Pa., with a radio show of her own broadcast from the hotel’s elegant Gold Room. Following that, she played at Holiday Inn piano bars as they opened up throughout the region.

During this time, Delsey got her undergraduate and masters degrees at Duquesne University, through a non-traditional program, and headed for New York City. "I wanted to be among the great jazz musicians," she said. Her uncle, former Pittsburgher Eddie Jefferson, helped her to find a place to live on 52nd Street, across from Birdland, and his agent found work for her at clubs. "I went all over the city and to New Jersey to play, and sometimes late at night I was the only one on the train." In the daytime, she studied at Julliard.

Her big break came when she met Peter McDonough, a British musician and masters degree student, who persuaded her to go to London where she recorded her own music for Decca and five other companies. McKay performed all over the continent, including representing the United States in Brussels, Belgium, at the European Song Festival, where she won first prize for the music she had written. Her winning song, The Lady in the Water, was written the day of Martin Luther King’s assassination. After six years in Europe, McKay came back to Pittsburgh and wrote music for the Bicentennial, which was used in schools throughout the U.S. and placed in the Congressional Archives through the efforts of Senator John Heinz and Congressman William Morehead.

There were more women who were active on the entertainment scene at that time. Other entertainers honored by the Musicians Union in 1997 were Doreen Faust, Mary Dwinda, Paula Thomas, Florence Spurreir, Ruby Young Hardy, Betty Dugan, Julie Melman, Ruth and her sister Gloria Aiello, Beverly Durso, and Alyce Brooks. Two women were honored who played classical music: Rose Ressa and Ruth Fischer.

The women are confident, resilient, and independent to this day. Gloria Siegle-Spiegler still teaches music. Patti and Marty Faloon lost their son Steve at age 23 to aplastic anemia. Patti wrote a book, Tale of a Trail, about her son and the running trail named for him. She performed as Rainbow the Clown with a tear painted on her cheek until her passing in 2002.

Regina Peterson married Eddie Abrams, who later managed the Copa Club on Liberty Avenue, in 1947. "I never thought I'd get married, because I had seen 5,000 men every day for a year," she laughs. Peterson is still an active member of the Musicians Union and trying to sort out 35 albums of photos.

Delsey McKay has worked with Children's Hospital as a foster grandparent, and has played throughout the area for children to inspire them and to reinforce the importance of music. She also used her skills with Generations Together, a University of Pittsburgh project that encourages interaction between generations. She is working on a jazz opera about the founding of Washington, D.C.

At age 95, Jean Anderson was still teaching 30 piano and violin students each week. "My life is such a happy one, and I don't have money worries, so I just charge $3 a lesson, and if they can't pay, I give them the lessons anyway." She liked to reminisce but the lessons for her were about living in the present. She passed away in December 2003.

Bette McDevitt lives on Pittsburgh’s North Side and laments that she never wore ostrich feathers. In her next life, she longs to be a tap dancer.