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Joannie Schendel
by Candace Wilson

The first anyone knew Joannie Schendel could sing was at age 4. “My minister asked if anyone knew ‘Jesus Loves Me.’ I stood up in the pew and belted it out. They knew they had something to deal with.” That beginning led to a music career that has spanned 72 years – so far.

Known as Joannie Wills and Joannie Jackson, she has sung all over the world. Now 83, Joannie sings at several events a month in the Seattle, Washington area, giving benefit concerts for senior centers and leading singalongs at retirement homes. A recent “gig” with the Sound Singers of Edmonds, Washington, was at the Helen H. Jackson Women of Valor Awards Ceremony, officiated by U.S. Senators Maria Cantwell and Hillary Clinton. She has also recently made two promotional CD’s.

Her career officially began at age 11. Already a regular church soloist, she sang on her first radio show, WLS “Barn Dance Theater,” produced in Chicago, Illinois, and aired nationally.

During high school, Joannie’s father, a widowed army officer, was posted in Panama. Joannie, youngest of 5 children, was sent back to Chicago to stay with family friends her senior year. She laughingly recalled her first club engagement at age 16. “The family I stayed with was very strict and sent us to bed early. Then came “good night time” when I climbed out the window to catch a ride with the band.” The band performed Friday and Saturday nights for several weeks, and then were asked to add week nights. “That’s when I got caught. My foster dad came into the club with some business associates. I was singing when I saw him. I stopped in the middle of the song and ran off stage.” Not soon enough, though. Her “dad” was furious, and that brought a temporary halt to her career.

After high school came more engagements in Chicago nightclubs. Joannie met and married her husband, a paratrooper who was later killed in Tunisia. The two had a daughter who stayed with Joannie’s grandmother in California during the war.

Visiting her agent one day, Joannie met the Hammersteins, the Gershwins, and Jerome Kern, who were brainstorming about the idea of the Camp USO shows. “They asked me if I liked the name United Service Organization. I said it would never fly.” Joannie became a regular Camp USO performer, traveling all over the world for 4-1/2 years with Donald O’Connor, Danny Kaye and others. Tours lasted 5-6 months, with 1 or 2 performances daily.

One day she was singing “Embraceable You” to 3,000 men on a hillside in Biak, New Guinea, when a single Japanese Zero flew overhead. A sergeant pushed her into a bunker, and the next thing Joannie knew, it was a week later, and she was in the hospital with an excruciating head injury. She was sent on a stretcher to a Palm Springs hospital for a lengthy stay. She kept on singing, going by wheelchair from ward to ward to sing to the patients. “But I didn’t know the new songs they wanted. We had no news from the states for months at a time on tour.”

After the war, Joannie worked on Broadway for several musical productions. Back in California, she became an understudy for Betty Hutton, but a radio performance with the then unknown Johnny Ray made her too famous to continue in that position. A back injury incurred during the filming of “How the West Was Won” brought Joannie to Seattle in 1953 for treatment. “My agent said, ‘No one goes there.’” But she got a booking at Grosvenor House with the Art Barduhn Trio, and then worked on Channel 5 for a year.

“I hated Seattle. It rained the entire winter.” She met her husband, Al Schendel, who worked for Capitol Records. “He said he’d make me love Seattle, and he did.”

The couple adopted two children, and Joannie cut back on singing to care for her family. She became aware that birthday parties were stressful events for mothers, and started a business putting on children's parties. Joannie became "Happy the Clown," and was so successful, she eventually hired 9 other women to work simultaneously as "Happy". The clowns were well known in Seattle and appeared at many local events. Joannie sold the "Happy" business, but continued as a clown for 28 years.

She has kept singing throughout, as a soloist, as a member of her church choir, and in various Seattle groups. She also worked as a movie extra for Terry Terry Productions, appearing in "The Runner" and "Heaven Can Wait."

Joannie put her clown clothes back on as a senior citizen to work with Intergenerational Innovation Society, a program that involves seniors to help children with remedial math and reading. She raved about the program. "Working with the children is what is keeping me young," she said. She resigned from the board of Intergenerational Innovations in November 2005 when an eye condition left her unable to drive.

Joannie heads to Panama this month to see an old friend since Camp USO days. After that? She'd like to do more traveling. "I would like to see Europe as it is now. My last view was after the war when it was in ruins." She wants to make a new CD. "My daughter says all my songs are 20 years older." And she will go on singing songs that touch people's hearts, songs like "As Time Goes By," "Because of You," "Memories". She will go on brightening people's lives with music.