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“In Yakima, I found that you can be a big fish in a little pond or a little fish in a big pond.”

— Oleta Adams

By JEREMY MEYER
Of the Herald-Republic

The knock on Oleta Adams' dressing room door wasn't opportunity or a stagehand with an onstage countdown, it was Elton John.

The two were scheduled to sing at a star-studded concert, and the British pop star stopped by to chat with the singer from Yakima before he performed.

Twenty-four years ago, when Oleta Adams was a senior at Yakima's Davis High School, this would have been the stuff of dreams. But in 1995, meetings with celebrities are a part of life for Adams.

"When you're able to come from a place like Yakima and you're sitting there rubbing shoulders with the Johnny Carsons of the world, you feel like you've done something," she said in a telephone interview from her Kansas City, Kan., home.

Adams definitely has done something — critically acclaimed albums, Grammy Award nominations, huge international tours, network television appearances —

STILL, THIS IS the same girl who thrilled parishioners of her stepfather's Baptist church or whose lead performance in the high-school production of "Hello Dolly" brought down the house.

How far her star has risen. Sometimes she even seems awed by it all.

"When you meet people like Nancy Wilson, Patu LaBelle, Aretha Franklin or you get calls from people like Quincy Jones, you just start thinking, 'Oh, wow,'" Adams said. "You still have to kind of pinch yourself, because you remember when you were watching these famous people on television, and then you're sitting there with them."

She'll be the first to tell you, or even Elton, that she's just ordinary folk. And that aw-shucks sweetness and down-to-earth realism are direct reflections of her Yakima roots, she said.

"I always talk about it," she said. "I was born in Seattle, and when I was in the sixth grade we moved to Yakima. I thought it was great because you could walk anywhere. Everything was close to home. In Yakima, I found that you can be a big fish in a little pond or a little fish in a big pond." The people of Yakima also helped Adams see the world for the first time. When she was a high-school student, she had an opportunity to travel to Europe with a youth choir, but she didn't have the money. A Yakima resident opened a bank account and advertisement in the Yakima Herald-Republic for contributions.

"All sorts of people contributed," Adams said. "You name it, they did all sorts of things to raise

Oleta Adams

No matter how far — or high — her career takes her, she'll always remember Yakima

money, and in a week's time I had my registration fee."

That community closeness stayed with her and is why she chooses to live in Kansas City and not one of the nation's entertainment hubs.

"I like smaller places because people still care," she said. "You have friendly neighbors — you get to have the same set of friends for years."

ADAMS' CAREER started in Yakima, after graduating from Davis High School in 1971. She turned down a scholarship to Pacific Lutheran University to pursue a professional singing career. She got her first break in 1973, when she joined Peggy Fleming's "Concert on Ice," but the gig didn't lead to commercial success. Instead she began performing at nightclubs around the state before moving to Kansas City in 1980.

Her second big break came in the mid-1980s, when the British pop duo, Tears for Fears, heard her perform in Kansas City and wanted her to sing on their next album.

"She got me," said Roland Orzabal of Tears for Fears in a 1986 Melody Maker magazine interview. "And for me if music can open you up and reduce you to tears, then it's doing its job. I thought she was one of the best singers I'd ever heard."

EXPOSURE ON the Tears for Fears "Seeds of Love" album and the band's accompanying tour awakened the record industry to Adams' voice. Her first solo album, "Circle of One," released in 1991, contained the hit, "Get Here," which was nominated for a Grammy Award. That year she was named the opening act on Michael Bolton's international tour.

In 1993 she released her second album, "Evolution," and toured with Luther Vandross. That year she also received a Grammy Award nomination for her cover version of Elton John's "Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me," off the "Two Rooms" tribute album for John and lyricist Bernie Taupin.

She has yet to break through to the American audience, in spite of attaining critical and European success.

"All I want is just to be heard," she said, adding that U.S. radio stations are extremely selective in playing the music of new artists who don't fall into a specific genre. She hopes this will change with the release of "Moving On," which includes some original songs, "New Star" and "You Need to be Loved."

In Europe, the album is already a success. "We haven't done a major push here," she said. "What a wild time to release an album. Everyone has records out now, the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Michael Jackson. But I think I have a wonderful product. It's got a lot of variety. It's much more rhythm-and-blues."

The album is the first she's made without Lee Farrell, Adams' close friend and personal manager. Farrell, who died in 1990, had been with Adams from the beginning. She was Adams' choir teacher at Davis High School and quit teaching to become Adams' manager.

"I'll never forget the time when I brought her back a gold record and she just cried," Adams said. "She took the gold record out to show it to the neighbors. I think she was always worried I would dump her on the street, because a lot of people do that when they get famous. But I was determined to stay with her."

After several months in mourning and picking up the pieces, Adams' life began to turn around. She received an honorary doctorate of music degree from the Berklee College of Music in Boston, Mass., and married her longtime boyfriend, John Cushman.

Now with a new husband, a new album and a world tour, Adams sees a bright future ahead. Her goal is to become a well-known name in America. In Yakima, she already is.

☎ Hear songs from Oleta Adams' new album, "Moving On," by calling Ext. 7430.

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