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Biography - A

Local History

Yakima's Oleta Adams is well on her way

by
AL
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Long before Oleta Adams grew to her present stature (5-feet-1, 95 pounds) she was devastating the homefolks in Yakima. Her voice, her soulful piano, her flawless directing of adult choirs when she was 13 years old — all these things enabled her to lift an audience a foot off the ground and keep it there for hours after a performance.

But it's a whole new bag when you move onto a nightclub stage for the first time.

"In the first place the people aren't there just to listen to you," she says. "Maybe they want to listen and maybe they don't. It's up to the performer. You have to learn how to really communicate with an audience in a nightclub. You have to be appealing enough as a performer to make them want to listen."

Oleta made her nightclub debut just a

few months ago in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. She was 19. She'd graduated from Davis High School in 1971 and then, under the managerial aegis of her high school director Mrs. Lee Farrell, had gone to Los Angeles for several months. She cut a few tentative tapes and got a booking agent and then, finally, there she was.

In Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Which, if it's your first professional booking, is situated halfway between Frozen Heartstrings and Screaming Nerve-ends, reading north to south.

She stepped onto the stage and sat down at the piano. Minimal applause. Maximum glass-clinking.

She began to play the piano. Murmur, murmur. Clink, clink. HA HA HA HA from over in a corner of the room.

She began to sing.

And from the depths of her 95-pound frame came that fantastic voice so powerful in its presence and intensity that even the most inveterate glass-clinker stopped clinking. And by the time the song was finished she had Cedar Rapids in the same emotional state as Yakima, Wash., reading south to north.

Playing in Spokane

Oleta Adams wound up a two-week stand at the Davenport Hotel in Spokane last night, but she isn't going anywhere. The Davenport has held her over for two more weeks.

"We don't have a showy stage setup," she said by phone. "Just a bass guitar and lead guitar and piano. I play the

piano and talk to the people and sing everything from blues to pop and everything in between."

"Very relaxed show," said Ben Farrell, part of Oleta's management team. "Oleta is very relaxed."

"Now!" said Oleta.

North to Alaska

She works four 45-minute sets a night from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m., which sounds like a schedule that would relax anybody if it didn't wear you down to a grease-spot on the floor first.

"Oh no," she said, "this just flies. Before we came here I did five weeks of five hours a night in Anchorage. That is a rough schedule."

And she discovered things are done differently in Alaska. For instance her working hours were from 5 to 10 p.m. Who ever heard of a nightclub performer going home at 10 p.m.?

"You have to understand," she said, "in Alaska the drinking is a little heavier than in the outer 48. And they start earlier."

Ah, wickedness!

Alaska is a long way from Yakima but no further than Oleta's present life from her upbringing as the daughter of the Rev. John Adams, pastor of the Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church where Oleta sang and led the choir for so many years.

These days the evidence of worldly decadence is all around her. Is she shocked?

"Not shocked," she said. "Just challenged. It goes back to the communications thing — in a nightclub it's a challenge to get and hold their attention. There was a lot of maturing I had to do very quickly."

That's at 19.

At 21 she'll be a seasoned veteran. And old enough to buy a drink in the places she works.



OLETA ADAMS

... from Yakima
with love