Carmen McRae: vocalist turned movie star?

By Elyn Garrett

Jazz vocalist, Carmen McRae was in town last week for a four day engagement at Ethel's Place and we talked with her about her role in the recently released film "Jo Jo Dancer, Your Life Is Calling."

The Columbia Pictures film, which is a project of comedian Richard Pryor (he wrote, produced, directed and starred in the film), was released last week across the country and audiences everywhere have been rushing to the box office.

At the very onset of the interview, McRae told us that she does not profess to be an actress. She said she was drawn to this project because of the mutual admiration she and Pryor have for each other's work.

"Playing the role of Jo Jo's grandmother wasn't that difficult," said McRae. "Many of the character's views and attitudes are my own."

Carmen played the role of a very strong-willed, proud, independent grandmother, who placed a lot of emphasis on the importance of being proud of one's family name.

"I am all of those things when it comes to family," remarked Carmen. "Having these things in common with the character really made me want the part."

Evidently, Pryor really wanted McRae to have the part. She was the only person to read for the role. Pryor hired her immediately following her first reading. "That was a thrill for me," said Carmen, and understandably so.

The grandmother is revered most in young Jo Jo's life. That says a lot when you consider that the film is thought to be an autobiographical account of Pryor's life.

Carmen McRae

We asked if she thought this movie would bring about offers for her in other films. "I have already heard some talk of some potential projects, but after doing "Jo Jo Dancer" and seeing how demanding acting is, I don't know if or when I'll consider another role;

"Because I have always been a performer, I am use to the strenuous routines associated with performing, but I easily become impatient," stated Carmen.

"When you do a movie there are countless hours when you stand around merely waiting for them to film your scene. I hate waiting. Always have. When I arrive at the location, I'm ready to get going."

"I also hate the way they change your lines in the script at a moment's notice. You hardly ever have to change the words of a song."

Even though McRae has not thought about accepting another acting role any time soon, she will still be dazzling audiences with her vocal expertise, which will make a lot of jazz fans content for some time to come.

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Cicely Tyson stars as a bag lady in 'Samaritan'

Wizened, wrinkled and wrapped in rags, whisps of gray hair sticking out from beneath her two soiled, moth-eaten wool hats, a tiny, bent and limping woman slowly pushed a cart of her overfilled torn plastic bags through the streets of Washington, D.C., pursuing and unpursing her mouth as if moving it around the toothless gums of the very elderly.

Even at close range, she was totally unrecognizable as the vivacious, sparkling-eyed, flawless-skinned Cicely Tyson she had submerged beneath extensive makeup, tattered clothing and imagined persona of a homeless bag lady for her role as Muriel in "Samaritan," the dramatic special to be broadcast Monday, May 19 on CBS.

The versatile actress, distinguished for her Emmy Award-winning title role in "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman," as well as for her performances in such acclaimed television specials as "A Woman Called Moses," "Welcome to Success: The Marva Collins Story," "King" and "Playing with Fire," remained in character, as is her way, when the camera was not on her or even rolling at all.

After a scene was completed, she would limp down the street and into her trailer, speaking only as if she were Muriel, not Cicely Tyson.

"I simply don't know how to work any other way," she explains. "I just have to be the character — give it my all, totally, completely, period. It has everything to do with distraction. Anything that gets in the way, robs the audience of a full interpretation of the character. So if someone calls me Cicely or I'm asked to address business other than the business of the character, I feel I'm selling the audience short."

The week before the start of production, she ventured, with a similarly dressed-down bodyguard, into the lower regions of New York City's Grand Central Station, where many homeless exist through frigid winter nights.

"That night I saw them as they are. I actually met them. I then realized that few of them are like that, and it became more important to me to represent my character accurately. Through my research, I also learned that most who are out there wouldn't be were it not for an unfortunate set of circumstances. They would still be productive citizens."

The actress' interests in the plight of the world's homeless and starving was heightened by her visit last year to Africa where she saw much devastation.

"It's going on in Africa," she notes. "It's going on in Asia. And, it's going on in our own backyard. I hope, in some way, this film will help."

Cicely Tyson and Martin Sheen star in "Samaritan, the drama based on facts in the life of homeless activist, Mitch Snyder, airing Monday, May 19 on CBS.

— Jazz

Continued from page 5

Blues Alley in D.C., **Jean Carn** is performing; and at **Woodie's** Hilltop Pub, pianist **Ray Bryant** is the headliner.

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Also forgot to add another tidbit: there will be jazz downtown in Baltimore again this Summer. You might remember last year where the **Jon Hendricks** family group performed, among other notables.

It was located in Market Place, just in front of the Brokerage, and turned out to be one of the unsung events taking place in our town. And, we want to do our part to see it doesn't happen this year.

The bookings are not complete for the series, the only thing we do know is that **Lionel Hampton** and his orchestra have been signed. We'll keep you informed.

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Stevie Wonder: A man of transitions

At the age of ten, he began his career as Little Stevie Wonder under contract to Motown Records. Two years later he was on his way to superstardom with a hit record and a hit album. He was beginning to make the first transition from singing rhythm and blues hits to creating innovative music, bridging the gap between soul and pop.

Stevie Wonder, who will be seen as a guest on "Neil Diamond ... Hello Again," musical special to broadcast Sunday, May 25 on CBS, recalls that his musical roots began even earlier than that.

"Although nobody in my family was particularly musical, I'm told I began pounding a tin pan with a spoon when I heard music on the radio."

The tin pounding was followed by the piano and then came the harmonica, given to him by an uncle, all before Stevie's fifth birthday. Next on the musical instrument agenda came drums. Stevie wore out several sets of toy drums before the local Lions Club gave him a real set at Christmas party.

From the very beginning of his career at Motown, Stevie took an enormous interest in the music that he performed. This led, in turn, to collaborating with Motown's lyricists and composers. After a concert at New York's Philharmonic Hall, followed by his first solo nightclub engagement at the Copacabana, his composing struck an uneasy compromise between the Motown Sound and his own free-wheeling musical explorations.

Another transition occurred when, leaving Motown, he began to tape his experiments on synthesizers, pouring out musical ideas he had been storing up for years. All of which resulted in the album, "Music of My Mind." Thanks to modern recording techniques, it was Stevie Wonder who was heard on the piano, drums, harmonica, organ, clavichord, clavinet and synthesizers. Oh yes, he also sang the background vocals!

Again a transition for Stevie, who is considered a musical pioneer in the use of synthesizers, is the use of computers in the service of his music, not only in the recording studio but on the concert stage as well.

In explaining his use of electronics, Stevie says that he considers electronic sound possibilities to be like different paints an artist uses to create a picture, an expression. "Only what I'm making is a sound expression, a painting that the ear can see."

Singer-composers Stevie Wonder and Neil Diamond, two of the giants in the music industry, compare notes and join on a duet of Wonder's "Sir Duke" in the special "Neil Diamond . . . Hello Again," airing Sunday, May 25, on CBS.

— Meanderings

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Call Teletron at 1-800-233-4050 for ticket information.

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The Parks Sausage Company is hosting a breakfast set to benefit the Cab Calloway Jazz Institute of Coppin State College on Saturday, May 17 at the New Club Casino, 1517 Pennsylvania Ave. The affair begins at 9 a.m. and donations are $5.

The Star of Stars, **Bill Cosby** will bring his brand of comedy to the Capital Centre on Friday, May 23 at 8 p.m. Tickets are $18.50 and $16.50. For more information call 202-337-3389.

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The Kentucky Fried Chicken Gospel Music Competition is off and running. A panel of five judges will select no more than 25 semi-finalists in four categories.

Auditions are scheduled fc June 10 and June 11 in Baltimore and June 17 and June 18 i Washington, D.C.

A total of $9,000 in cash will b contributed to the churches spor soring the winning entrants. I addition, competition winners i each category will be awarded trophy.

The final competition will b held on Sunday, June 13 at th Kennedy Center. Ca 202-842-3456 for more details.

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