

BELLES OF INDIANA CELEBRATE AT 50TH ANNIVERSARY REUNION

By Melissa Korzec

“It’s a grand night for singing
The moon is flying high
And somewhere a bird
who is bound to be heard
Is throwing his heart at
the sky...”

From 1952 through 1976, the Belles of Indiana greeted each audience with those lyrics from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “It’s a Grand Night for Singing.” The group was organized by the late Professor of Music Eugene Bayless, and later conducted by Professor David Greenlee and then Dr. Roy Samuelsen. The Belles were important musical ambassadors for the university, sharing their jazz vocal stylings in performances all over the world. In fact, this group was the first ensemble from the university to perform overseas with the USO when they traveled in the Far East for 11 weeks in 1955. The trip was more than just a chance to sing and to travel: It was an opportunity to spread hope and peace to soldiers stationed overseas. Their country had called on these women, and they answered the call.

Fifty years after that momentous trip, a group of those women gathered in Bloomington on the weekend of July 28–31, 2005, to reminisce and reconnect with one another. The weekend began with a gathering at the DeVault Alumni Center. “We all

had pieces of memorabilia to share with each other,” commented Roberta Ratliff Graham, BM’60. That evening, in appropriate fashion, the Belles joined in singing some of the songs that had united them some 50 years earlier. They opened with “It’s a Grand Night for Singing” and “Somewhere, Over the Rainbow.”

“It was wonderful that we could bridge all those years through song,”

They do get along! In fact, Graham says that the group does an excellent job of staying in touch. “We get together every five years.”

On Saturday night the group dined together, then headed to the Musical Arts Center, where they enjoyed that evening’s performance of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *HMS Pinafore*. At intermission, they gathered on the mezzanine, where they met Dean



The Belles in 1955, at the 38th Parallel in Korea:

Back Row: Doris Day, Linda Foncannon, Joyce Lancaster (hidden partially), Mary St. Clair, Sally Graham, Barbara Lockard, Ellen Dallas, Mary Jane Musgrave, Annabelle Baldrige, Joan Drew, Sondra Gauthier, Sandra Pawol, Sue Ann Unger, Irma Bartley, Mary Maurer, Keitha Bayless, Eugene Bayless, Vera Scammon, Cynthia Findley. Front Row: Dennis Escol, Helen Rapp, Joyce Harrod, Nancy Speed, Carolyn Hill, Sharlie Shull, Robert Bluemle, Roberta Ratliff.

Courtesy of Roberta Graham

says Graham. The group was accompanied by IU School of Music graduate Kim Carballo, BA’97, MM’99. Carballo recalls, “I enjoyed getting to know the group a little bit, particularly as they all seem to share a great love for the music they made and still make. It was very encouraging to see that last over so many years. In fact, it was like eavesdropping on a family reunion — except that they all got along!”

Gwyn Richards and were presented with long-stemmed roses. “We just couldn’t get enough of that reunion weekend!” says Graham.

Joining the group that weekend was the sister of one of their fellow travelers. Lorna Dallas-Brown, herself a Belle during the 1960s, is the sister of Ellen Dallas Wiggins, a member of the group that went to the Far East. Ellen died a few months before the reunion.



Dean Gwyn Richards celebrates with Belles (left to right) Carolyn Hill Pain, Foncannon Tucker, Barbara Lockard Zimmerman, Mary Jane Musgrave Wirts, Sondra Gauthier Harroff, Roberta Ratliff Graham, Helen Rapp Nefkens, and Sharlie Shull Stuart at their 50th anniversary reunion, July 30, 2005.

Lorna said, “Their stories touched off many memories that I could then relate to my sister, and the laughs and tears flowed plentifully from this wonderful reminiscing. Sharlie, Joyce, Denny, Carolyn, Helen, Linda, Sandy, Bobbi, Mussie, and Barbara...those Belles attending this reunion made me feel so very special and welcome, just as they had all those servicemen whom they had sung for and talked with in 1955.”

“It’s a Grand Night for Singing” ends with:

... the earth is aglow
and to add to the show
I think I am falling in love!
Falling, falling in love!

It’s easy to fall in love with the Belles. They will forever hold a place in the heart of Indiana University and the Jacobs School of Music. We are grateful to them for sharing their beauty and love of song with this campus, and with the world.

To read Lorna Dallas-Brown’s account of the 1955 Belles of Indiana USO tour to the Far East, taken from her sister’s diaries, and of the reunion weekend, go to music.indiana.edu/iumusic.

Were you a Belle of Indiana? We’d love to hear from you, to learn more about the Belles, and to connect Belles with one another. Please contact Melissa Korzec at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music Development Office with your contact information and stories, and please let us know what years you sang with the group. You can reach Melissa at mkorzec@indiana.edu, by phone at (812) 855-4656, or by letter to the Indiana University School of Music, 1201 E. 3rd Street, Bloomington, IN 47405.

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