



MEDIA RELEASE

More Information: Cynthia Lucas 512-740-4412; www.bozzies.com/press

Jazz Legend Connee Boswell's Wheelchair Discovered

Peekskill, New York, June 25, 2008 – Researchers studying the lives of the widely influential singing trio, the Boswell Sisters, recently discovered the first wheelchair of the fabled singer Connee Boswell near Peekskill, NY, a Hudson river town 50 miles north of New York City. Found in the former home of sister Martha Boswell Lloyd in nearby Putnam Valley, the chair had been tucked away in an attic for over 70 years and nearly forgotten.

“We had no idea the chair still existed,” said David McCain, who, with Connee’s niece, Vet “Chica” Minnerly is completing a biography of the legendary New Orleans trio, whose harmonic vocal arrangements made a deep and revolutionary impression on jazz and popular music in the 1930s. “The family who bought the house after Martha died found it in the attic when they moved in. They left it there for all these years. We are grateful to them and to the social services agencies in Westchester and Putnam Counties who made this recovery possible.”

The three sisters—Martha, Connee and Vet (“Vet” was short for Helvetia)—were classically trained musicians who became internationally famous by blending the jazz influences of their native New Orleans with innovative, rhythmic and multi-layered vocal arrangements. This original style came to be known as “the Boswell Sound” and “Boswell Rhythm.” The Boswell Sound was influential to—and has been carried on by—subsequent vocal groups from the Andrews Sisters to the Manhattan Transfer. Connee Boswell’s solo work influenced such singers as Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra. Connee’s disability was described in a 1959 press release:

...The full extent of her accomplishments is greater felt when one realizes that at the age of three, Connee suffered a damaging polio attack which left her, for some time, completely immobile. Recuperation was slow and painful, although she gradually regained the full use of her arms and body – But so devastating was the siege that she has been unable to walk since.”

Despite Connee’s handicap, the Boswell Sisters became local stars in 1920s New Orleans and soon took the leap to vaudeville. It was another leap, this from a hotel window in Arkansas City, Kansas, that further impaired the small bit of mobility that Connee had left. In a game of hide and seek with her sisters she slid out a window to what she thought was a porch below. A shadow hid the gap that opened to a basement 17 feet below and the fall further damaged her back and leg. Although Martha and Vet had carried their sister “pack saddle” style to their various engagements

long before this second accident, it would be two more years before they acquired a wooden chair on wheels.

“This wheelchair was used by Connee as early as 1931 in New York when the Boswell Sisters were first heard on network radio,” reports Randall Riley, Boswell collector and one of the trio that discovered the chair. “It’s pictured in a few photos of the sisters from 1931 until 1934. Connee was often seen being pushed by musicians like the Dorsey Brothers, Bunny Berrigan and Glenn Miller after rehearsals and recording sessions. She was introduced to President Hoover, Mayor Jimmy Walker and Prince George, the future King of England, seated in this chair.”

Although Connee’s handicap was well-known, her wheelchair was not seen onstage during the Boswell Sisters’ performances.

“Martha played the piano for the trio, so Connee would be carried out and placed on the piano bench,” said McCain. “When the curtain rose the audience would see Martha and Connee seated, and their sister Vet behind them with her hands on their shoulders. They even took their bows from this position.”

Martha and Vet retired from show business for marriage and family in 1936. Connee married their manager and continued to perform well into the 1960s. She performed at countless benefits and charities on behalf of the handicapped, such as the March of Dimes. Because of her handicap, the government would not allow her to entertain overseas during World War II. But there were plenty of hospital visits to veterans and to crippled children’s hospitals throughout her career. Kay Starr, who first met Connee when they toured with Joe Venuti’s Orchestra in 1943, recalled that wherever they played on their tour together, Connee would discreetly visit the hospitals and spend time with patients with physical challenges.

Later, in her solo career, husband and manager Harry Leedy designed a chair from a cocktail stool for her stage appearances that, with the help of long skirts, made Connee appear to be standing. For appearances in clubs, she used gold and silver plated wheelchairs designed to go with the gowns she used in her performances.

“We know that one chair Harry made for her was destroyed in a fire,” said McCain. “The family lost track of the other chairs after she passed away in 1976 and they may no longer exist.

A June 1, 2008 fire on the Universal Studios lot in Hollywood also engulfed the Decca master tapes of Connee’s late 40s and 50s recordings as a soloist and with Bing Crosby.

“But Martha kept this chair, the one from the very beginning of their career,” Riley noted. “You get the sense that this was something very special to her. After losing so much in the Universal fire it almost feels like Martha has given us back a symbol of just how much she and her sisters were able to accomplish.”

The wheelchair is being given to Vet Boswell’s daughter, Chica Minnerly and will be part of a “Second Line” memorial event, celebrating the music and lives of the Boswell Sisters on the 50th anniversary of Martha’s passing which will take place July 5 at the Hillside Cemetery, 1033 Oregon Rd. in Cortlandt Manor, NY. The public is invited to attend.

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PHOTOGRAPHS

High-resolution photographs are available upon request



David McCain



The Boswell Sisters
L to R
Vet, Connee, Martha
Taken at the White House in 1932 where
the sisters met President Herbert Hoover.
Pictured with Assistant Secretary of the
Navy Ernst Janchke, also of New Orleans