

AUGUST 2010

FOREVER YOUNG

GORD ATKINSON'S SHOWBILL**In Remembrance**

The recent death of a gracious lady of song, Joan Fairfax, has re-kindled warm memories of another time and another era. As one of the featured headliners of the early years of Canadian television, she will be fondly remembered by people of her generation. After a lengthy illness she passed away June 19, two days before her 84th birthday, at her home in Port Orange, FL. She is survived by her husband of 64 years, developed-contractor, Tom Higgins. She is also survived by two sisters and a brother who live in the Toronto area.

There was a close connection between our families. Joan's maiden name was Pickup and her brother, Ron, is the former husband of my cousin, Lois, who was Joan's best friend.

Long before colour TV and cable TV a repertory company of performers and broadcasters were Canada's video pioneers and the country's first TV household names. Joan Fairfax was a prominent member of that elite, talented group. She was also an accomplished accordionist, pianist, arranger and musical conductor.



Born in Blackburn, England, her family immigrated to Canada in 1928 when she was only two years old. During the wartime years of the 1940's she toured military bases and sang at Red Cross fundraisers. As a trained coloratura soprano, whose lovely voice was at ease singing popular and traditional ballads, she was a major CBC star on radio and television. Her duets with balladeer and orchestra leader, the late Denny Vaughn, on his weekly musical reviews were very popular with 1950's TV viewers.

In 1955 Ottawa's first modern shopping centre, Westgate, on Carling Ave. Was opened. For that festive occasion a gala outdoor event took place starring Joan and Denny Vaughn. I had the pleasure of being the emcee and hosting a CFRA remote broadcast. On another Ottawa visit, Joan was a supper club guest star at the elegant Canadian Grill of the Chateau Laurier Hotel.

During the 1959-60 TV season she hosted her own CBC program. Her special guests included jazz pianist Marian McPartland and popular Canadian singers, Wally Koster, Allan Blye and Roger Doucet.

In the 1960's Joan and Tom moved to the US, where she travelled extensively with her newly formed "all girl orchestra". A very young Rich Little was their impressionist guest on one of their early tours. She also gained prominence south of the border with television appearances on the Jack Parr, Ed Sullivan and Lawrence Welk shows. At that time she and her husband had made their home in Tenafly, New Jersey in order to be close to the New York entertainment scene. We had a memorable chance meeting with her during a visit with Paul Anka and his family, who were also living in Tenafly.

In her latter years of retirement in Florida, Joan was active performing for charitable groups and at functions for senior citizens. She also recorded personal CD collections for distribution to her friends and long time fans. Her voice was still crystal clear.

This summer season has been a sad period of farewells to dear old friends. My comrade a CFMO-FM, Bill Lee, left us last month after a "stubborn battle with cancer". He was indeed "a golden voice" of the golden era of Ottawa radio. His long, successful career greatly enhanced the airwaves of CKOY/CKBY-FM and my own radio alma mater, the aforementioned CFMO. Bill was not only an exceptional broadcaster, but an inspiring family man, a truly "gentle man" and a friend to all of us who were privileged to call him our colleague; our heartfelt condolences to his beloved wife, Doreen, and their family. Since Bill had six children and I have seven, we often joked about our joint efforts to populate Ottawa.