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Donee Middleton, a transit operations supervisor, recovered her will to perform because of the insistence of her son and daughter.

*Photo by
Ned
Racine*

Donee Middleton Keeps a Song in Her Heart

- Division 3 singer recaptures her passion after 10-year hiatus

By NED RACINE, Editor

(April 1, 2008) Donee Middleton, a transit operations supervisor, loves to sing, she's sung almost her entire life. But it took a persistent nine-year-old boy and a Glendale Galleria karaoke contest to end a 10-year, self-imposed exile from her art.

That nine-year-old was Middleton's son Peter, who is now 12. She and he were listening to a karaoke contest in the mall. Contestants were singing the Tina Turner hit "What's Love Got to Do With It?" Young Peter decided his mother should take part.

"My son is the reason why I'm singing," Middleton states firmly. Her singing has included almost 30 open mike shows around Los Angeles, as well as a full-length show. Every day Peter and 17-year-old Dominique ask their mother if there is an open-mike show where she can perform.

"I couldn't be more blessed to have them behind me when it comes to this," Middleton explained. "They know a singer should be engaged in the art of singing."

Middleton comes from a musical family: three brothers play trumpet and saxophone, her sister sings and plays the piano. Her mother was a church choir director.

She studied voice in college at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, Connecticut. "I have exceptional tone, my professors told me that," Middleton recalled. "And they told me 'When you move to LA, sing. We want you to do it because you have such a nice tone.' "



Donee Middleton studied herself in a mirror while she sang to check that she was singing with emotion. *Photos by Sean Schricker*



With such a love for singing, why did Middleton stop singing for 10 years? Because when she sang, she would make herself cry—it was just too emotional. “I think I was afraid of getting in touch with those feelings. But now I’m ready for it.”

Although Middleton has been singing since she was five years old, she has a new challenge for her voice: She has been singing jazz for a year now. “Seriously singing with a producer, taking lessons, voice coach, in the studio making a CD, doing that all within the last year,” she explained.

“I just always loved this music,” she said of jazz. “At first I thought it was kind of corny, but I realized as I got older that this is where I live. It’s romantic, it’s beautiful. And now jazz is dying out.”

And then again, maybe it’s not. When she sang at the Dresden Room in Los Angeles in January, the Brooklyn native found herself singing jazz to an audience overwhelmingly aged 30 and under.

“The thing I’ve worked on the most is adding more emotion to the songs,” the four-year Metro employee explained. “I would

look in the mirror, play the music and then sing and watch myself. [Asking] am I emitting emotion?”

“It actually helped me using the mirror because people are telling me now that when I’m on stage, I’m very, very emotional,” said the graduate of George Gershwin Middle School, which was named after her favorite composer.

Oddly, Donee the singer sounds little like Donee the speaker. “Even people here [Division 3] say, ‘Wait a minute, that doesn’t sound like you.’” “My singing voice is actually a compilation of everything . . . I have ever learned about singing. My diction changes. I lose my New York accent when I sing.”

Now she’s recording a jazz Christmas album of international songs, including several in other languages.

Middleton tries to get in an hour of practice each day. Sometimes she does her breathing exercises at the window. Because talking is harder on her voice than singing, she tries to speak only when it is imperative, which means she sometimes sings to the bus operators.

The greatest joy for Middleton is singing for an audience, whether she's paid or not. "When I sing, I'm giving a gift to someone," she said. "There is nothing more rewarding than when you see someone accept a gift and they really like it."