

Local songbird opens up for Chick Singer Night

BY MIKE HOULIHAN

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In the shower I'm Irish tenor Ronan Tynan. He's the guy who sang "God Bless America" at Yankee Stadium during the World Series. Give me a bar of soap and I start wailing "The Fields of Athenry" and my ears curl forward just like the stout Dr. Tynan. Anybody who has witnessed my tenor in the tub will tell you my "Danny Boy" makes them weep.

But naked talent is one thing. Sure, I've warbled onstage, but I just can't seem to hit those high notes as well as I do while all soapy. Most of us shower superstars never take the leap and attempt a nightclub show. But Tuesday night a young lady will leave the cocoon and take flight as a chanteuse on the stage at the Beat Kitchen for Chick Singer Night.

Winifred Brown was teased as a kid growing up on the South Side, where she attended St. Leo Grammar School and Visitation High School. It might have been her name that got the kids to chuckle. Her dad is Wilfred, so blame him.

Black Mercedes

She never told her mother she wanted to sing, wasn't sure if she really had the right stuff. "I'm a mixed-race person. I've got all that stuff going." Her mother, Berniece, is African American, and, "My dad is German, straight from Heidelberg. So I have an interesting mix." She's driving a Mercedes-Benz with a soul train under the hood.

"Growing up, I loved listening to Aretha, absolutely loved it. I was in awe of her freedom. How in God's name could she just open that window and let that out? That was so intimate, how could you just show that to everyone?"

Winifred started to open her own window when she met Lori Maier, founder of Chick Singer Night. Lori was a singer who decided to put a Chicago show together for her singer friends, giving them a chance to create their own musical opportunities. She hired a band and booked a club, mailed out postcards and press releases, and arranged the music for eight featured singers for one night only. On Nov. 1, 1988, Chick Singer Night was born.

The Chick Singer empire

Tuesday night, Lori will celebrate the 16th anniversary of Chick Singer Night. It's now an empire with shows in Los Angeles; Nashville, Tenn.; Miami; Las Vegas; New York, and Hawaii. Lori is flying in from L.A. for the event at the Beat Kitchen, 2100 W. Belmont. She says, "I know how important it is for women in my profession to take some time to enjoy their music. Chick Singer Night gives women that opportunity. It's not a competition. It's not about who's the best. It's an evening when women can get together and share their music and their experience with each other."

Ten years ago, Winifred was in the audience for a Chick Singer Night. She met Lori that night and approached her for private voice lessons. Winifred had never sung in front of an audience, and Lori helped the once-shy beauty blossom into Winnie Brown, blues singer.

Winnie started performing in light opera and working on her act. She's been developing her chops all over Chicago, and Tuesday night will mark a reunion for the bashful babe from the South Side and her mentor Lori Maier. She'll sing some blues and her signature favorite tune, "I Can Cook, Too" by Comden and Green from the musical "On the Town."

*... I can cook too.
My fish can't be beat,
My sugar's the sweetest around.
I'm a man's ideal of a perfect meal
Right down to the demi-tasse.
I'm a pot of joy for a hungry boy,
Baby, I'm cookin' with gas.*

The morning I met Winnie, I told her she seemed more like a Winifred than a Winnie. She said, "Well, after you hear me sing the blues, I don't know, you may change your mind."

Well, come on then, let me hear some.

"I'm not gonna do that. I can barely connect a thought at this hour."

I would have even climbed into the shower with her to make her feel comfortable, but she wouldn't warble for me. Guess I'll have to drop by the Beat Kitchen on Tuesday.

Don't give her any lip

Winnie is a demure diva. I can't testify to her singing, but she is one gorgeous woman, I'll tell ya that. She says, "Honestly, I was teased to death. Finally I grew into my name and my lips. Everyone thought I had the biggest face and the biggest mouth in the world. Now everybody wants big lips. Isn't that amazing? I have had people ask me, 'Are those really your lips?' I've been teased all my life and now I'm asked if I bought them. Hilarious."

Winnie's lips are lovely, a sweet set of soup coolers. Tuesday night she promises to open them and let her talent sing out. A duckling no more, this timid swan will take the stage with a backup band to belt.

*Oh, I'm a gumdrop,
A sweet lollipop,
A dish you will wish you had took.
And what's more, baby, I can cook!*

We'll see you Tuesday, Winnie.