

Camilla Williams, opera star, retired IU professor, died Sunday: www.heraldtimesonline.com

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Legendary opera singer Camilla Williams was in failing health when her friends and colleagues Charles Webb and two-time Grammy winner Sylvia McNair stopped by her Bloomington apartment to sing to her a few months ago.

But illness did not stop the former IU professor — a teacher to the end — from giving McNair a voice lesson right then and there.

"It was the weirdest thing, because she herself (McNair) is a famous teacher," recalled Webb, the former longtime dean of Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music. "But she decided she was going to give Sylvia a lesson. ... That's vintage Camilla. She just decided she had something to say, so she would say it right there."

It was a scene that would likely surprise few of her friends and colleagues, who have variously described the woman who wore high heels into her 90s as outgoing, vivacious, larger than life, critical and "a consummate diva." The 92-year-old, who died of cancer Sunday at her Bloomington apartment, spent decades breaking barriers as a black opera singer and university professor before, during and after the civil rights era.

"The whole civil rights movement is embodied in a way in her life," said Peter Jacobi, IU professor emeritus in the School of Journalism and longtime Herald-Times classical music columnist. "She's, to me, been an amazing personality and talent, very God-loving and people-loving, despite the problems that she obviously faced as an African-American and as an African-American performer."

EDITORIAL: Camilla Williams: pioneer and star

Williams, born Oct. 18, 1919, in then-segregated Danville, Va., made history in 1946 when she became the first black woman to appear with a major opera company in the United States, taking the title role in Puccini's "Madama Butterfly" at the New York City Opera to great acclaim. Her career would ultimately include performances with some of the leading opera companies nationally and internationally until her retirement from opera in 1971, including giving a solo performance at the 1963 March on Washington just before Martin Luther King Jr.'s famed "I Have a Dream" speech, according to information provided by the Jacobs School.

In 1977, she would become the first black professor of voice at the Indiana University School of Music, according to information provided by the school. Friends say she devoted herself to her students until her retirement in 1997.

Blazing the trail for fellow black performers was not without its challenges, said Bloomington couple Lenny and Lou Newman, close friends of Williams. Williams had spoken of how she would have to sit in the back of a train away from her Bulgarian-born accompanist Boris Bazala and could not dine in the same restaurants as him.

"She could go perform at a function of some kind, but she couldn't eat with (guests) at the reception and she couldn't use their bathroom," Lenny Newman said. "She had hundreds of stories talking about the ongoing problems as an African-American (performer)."

But while Williams had a "historical memory" for those experiences, she was not bitter, Lou Newman said. Above all, she believed that God had a plan for her life and would take care of her.

"She was a woman of immense faith," Lou Newman said. "If there was ever any little problem, it was always, 'God is good, God will take care of it.'"

Webb, who recruited Williams and offered her the job as a professor at IU, attributes her success to her beauty, her outgoing personality and, above all, her stunning voice. It was, he said, "a really unusually beautiful voice, one that had resonance and projection, and it was a very shimmering sound at the top, when she could float those high notes that were beautiful to listen to."

And while Williams' voice had weakened somewhat over the decades — as all voices do — Jacobi and others say she still sang "with gusto and understanding."

Indeed, up until the very end of her life she was still belting out "Amazing Grace" and "How Great Thou Art" with the Newmans during their frequent visits, they say. During that time, her memory had also remained sharp, as did her characteristic fashion sense.

"She'd always dress as if she was going to be soloing at an opera," Lou Newman said. "She never went out without a gorgeous hat, a beautiful umbrella, heels and a mink stole."

Williams received many accolades throughout her career. Most recently, she was honored by Gov. Mitch Daniels with the Sagamore of the Wabash, the highest honor a governor can bestow, in 2010. The previous year, she received the IU President's Medal for Excellence.

"Her legacy will be two-fold," Jacobi said. "No. 1, she was one of the early African-Americans in the area of classical music. And No. 2, she was apparently a great teacher. She is leaving behind her technique and her passion in those she taught."

See more about Williams on the Jacobs School's website.

See stories from The Herald-Times' archive.

Memorials

A memorial service for Camilla Williams has been set for 3 p.m. Feb. 18 at the First United Methodist Church in Bloomington, according to the Funeral Chapel of Powell and Deckard. Memorial donations can be made to the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music or the Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History in Danville, Va., IU announced.

The Camerata Orchestra will perform a "Commemoration" honoring Camilla Williams, with Arie Lipsky conductor, soprano Janet Williams and organist Charles Webb as soloists, at 3:30 p.m. Feb. 19 at the Indiana University Auditorium. Tickets are \$15-\$18 for adults, \$7-\$10 for students. See www.cameratabloomington.com for details.

Camilla Williams
Photo courtesy Indiana University Jacobs School of Music.



In this H-T file photo are Boris Bazala, left, and Camilla Williams. The longtime friends and musical collaborators shared a household in Bloomington for several years. Bazala first met opera star Camilla Williams in 1947. He passed away in February. Chris Howell | Herald-Times



Camilla Williams in Bloomington, Indiana in this Aug. 16, 2010 file photo.

