

OBITUARIES

Martha Tilton, 91; '40s vocalist know for 'And the Angels Sing'

By Dennis McLellan
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Martha Tilton, a popular big-band vocalist best known for her recording of "And the Angels Sing" with the Benny Goodman orchestra in 1939, has died. She was 91.

Known as "Liltin' Martha Tilton" during her 1940s heyday, Tilton died of natural causes Friday at her home in Brentwood, said her granddaughter Maura Smith.

In the words of George T. Simon, author of the 1967 book "The Big Bands," Tilton was "a young, pretty and effervescent lass" when she was singing with the Jimmy Dorsey orchestra in the mid-1930s.

Tilton didn't start recording, however, until she joined Benny Goodman in 1937.

"To me, she was so unique because she didn't reinterpret the song that the composers gave her; she sang it straight, without her own styling or imprint on it," Chuck Cecil, longtime host of the Los Angeles-area radio show "The Swingin' Years," told The Times on Monday.

"So many of them become song stylists and they sort of reinterpret the song," Cecil said, "but she sang it with clarity and with charm — and very successfully. I'd say one of the definitive records of the swing era was the song 'And the Angels Sing.'"

During Tilton's time as vocalist with Goodman, the band made history when it performed the first-ever jazz concert at Carnegie Hall in 1938.

"She was the first nonclassical vocalist to appear at Carnegie Hall," Cecil said.

In his review of "The Liltin' Miss Tilton," a two-CD set from Capitol Records in 2000, critic Don Heckman wrote: "There are those who would say that Martha Tilton wasn't a jazz singer at all. But swing-era fans won't have any doubts, remembering her for a rocking version of 'Loch Lomond' at Benny Goodman's 1938 Carnegie Hall concert."

(In the 1955 film "The Benny Goodman Story" starring Steve Allen, Tilton played herself singing part of "And the Angels Sing" in the Carnegie Hall sequence.)

After leaving the Goodman band in 1939, Tilton went on her own.

She was one of the first singers to record for Capitol Records in the early 1940s. Among her biggest hits as a solo artist during the decade were "A Stranger in Town," "I Should Care," "I'll Walk Alone," "I Wonder, I Wonder, I Wonder," "That's My Desire" and "How Are Things in Glocca Morra?"

Tilton made guest appearances on numerous radio programs in the '40s and was vocalist for a time with the Billy Mills orchestra on "Fibber McGee and Molly." She also was the host of her own radio show for NBC, "Liltin' Martha Tilton Time," for a year, and she appeared in several movies, including "Crime, Inc." and "Swing Hostess," in which she starred as a band singer.

During the World War II years, Tilton participated in two USO tours with Jack Benny — to the South Pacific in 1944 and the next year to Germany to entertain Allied troops right after the war ended in 1945.

Al Lerner, a former big-band pianist and musical director and arranger, recalled visiting West Coast military hospitals with Tilton after the war.

"They used to wheel a piano through the wards, and she sang and I played," he said Monday. The patients "were so happy to see her. She was a wonderful lady — and admired and loved by everyone."

Born Nov. 14, 1915, in Corpus Christi, Texas, Tilton lived in Texas and Kansas before her family moved to Los Angeles when she was 7.

Naturally gifted as a singer, she began singing on a small radio station in Los Angeles while attending Fairfax High School. An agent who heard her on the radio signed her and got her jobs on radio shows on larger stations.

She dropped out of school in the 11th grade to join Hal Grayson's band and toured the West Coast with the band for a couple of years.

She later became part of a quartet called "Three Hits and a Miss," and was singing in a chorus on Goodman's "Camel Caravan" radio show in 1937 when the bandleader hired her as vocalist with his band.

Tilton, who later appeared in a daily half-hour TV show with Curt Massey that ran almost seven years in Los Angeles, continued to work through the mid-1960s.

In the mid-1980s, when her friend Lerner organized a big-band tribute to Benny Goodman, Tilton came out of retirement to be the featured vocalist on the band's tour of Australia.

"They loved her," Lerner said.

Tilton's younger sister, Liz, who also became a big-band singer, died in 2003.

In addition to her granddaughter Maura Smith, Tilton is survived by her husband, Jim Brooks; a daughter, Cathy Smith; a son, Jon Vannerson; and four other grandchildren.

A private service will be held Wednesday in Santa Monica.

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