

The shining Lucille Starr

By: **The bilingual chanteuse's incredible life story serves as the inspiration for PTE's newest play**
Posted: 12/11/2010 2:46 PM

Quand le soleil dit bonjours aux montagnes.

Whether you speak French or not, the opening line to Lucille Starr's million-selling 1964 hit The French Song is instantly recognizable. Produced in Los Angeles by Herb Alpert (of Tijuana Brass fame), the single became the first gold record by a Canadian female recording artist and topped record charts worldwide earning A&M Records its first gold single. At one time Lucille held the top five spots on the South African charts and, in the Netherlands The French Song was No. 1 for 19 weeks straight. Lucille's name remains forever associated with that sentimental bilingual ballad.

Back To You: The Life & Career of Lucille Starr, a play based on her rise to fame and bitter relationship with her first husband, opens Nov. 11 and runs until Nov. 28 at Prairie Theatre Exchange.

Born Lucille Marie Raymonde Savoie in St. Boniface in 1938, Lucille lived on Langevin Street for her first seven years.

"Some of the sweetest memories come from my childhood in Winnipeg," she recently reminisced from her home in Las Vegas. "I was born right near the Red River. I loved ice skating. My dad had a shoe repair shop and every year he'd give me a pair of those Sonja Henie white skates. I'd skate right down the street to school. Talk about a thrill. Mom was supposed to have twins but I'm the only one who showed up. She always said that two of me would be too much."

Lucille's performing aspirations were also nurtured here in St. Boniface. "At age six I knew I wanted to sing and dance. I don't remember half of what I was taught in school. There was a play that had singing and dancing in it. It meant a lot to me because that was my thing."

Unbeknownst to her parents, Lucille borrowed clothes and makeup from neighbours and performed in the play. "The play went on that night and somebody said to my mom, 'Isn't that Lucille up there?' Mom was very surprised. She didn't realize how much I wanted to sing and dance. I even wanted to tap dance my way down the aisle for my first communion. My dad had to take the clickers off my tap shoes."

Other childhood memories remain vivid for Lucille. "At Christmas time we'd go to midnight mass. It was a long walk from Langevin because we didn't have a car. Mom would bundle me up like a mummy. After midnight mass we had the réveillon including a great big turkey dinner. My daddy would play the fiddle and my mother sang. Sometimes they'd let me dance."

At the age of seven, Lucille moved with her family first to Windsor, Ont. and then to Maillardville near Port Coquitlam, BC where her singing career began in her teens with the Keray Regan Band.

Marrying bandleader Bob Regan (Frederickson), the two recorded as The Canadian Sweethearts releasing a number of singles in the late 1950s including The Hootenanny Express, I'm Leaving It All Up To You and Blue Canadian Rockies and toured Canada with Hank Snow and Wilf Carter. Her marriage to Regan was turbulent, marked by physical abuse. "My personal life was disastrous," she sighs. "We were fighting like cat and dog but onstage I was great."

Relocating to Los Angeles in the early '60s, Lucille met Dorsey Burnette of rockabilly duo Johnny & Dorsey Burnette who recommended her to trumpeter Herb Alpert. Looking for a hit to launch the then-fledgling A&M Records, Herb matched Lucille with The French Song.

"Actually it was re-named that because Herb couldn't pronounce the original title," Lucille explains. "He would say, 'I don't care if I can't understand the word, I know this is a hit.' For six weeks it didn't hit and then it took off. It went gold and platinum."

Released in the spring of 1964 at the height of the British Invasion, The French Song captured hearts all over the world. The following year Lucille was fêted with an invitation to be Grande Vedette (top star) of Amsterdam's Grand Gala du Disques, an international music cavalcade. She was in illustrious company following on the heels of previous honourees Frank Sinatra, Barbra Streisand and Charles Aznavour.

"I was the first Canadian or American to do a television special in the Netherlands," she states with pride. Lucille's popularity extended to Belgium, Switzerland, Mexico, Guam, the Philippines, Japan and Korea. She performed in many of these countries and, in South Africa, the Prime Minister held a special luncheon in Lucille's honour at the country's parliament. She headlined a five-week tour in South Africa in 1967 where she received several gold records.

Further hits followed including Colinda, Jolie Jacqueline and Bonjour Tristesse. Lucille's yodeling abilities were put to good use on the popular television show The Beverly Hillbillies on which she provided the singing voice for Cousin Pearl.

Meanwhile her marriage to Regan was on the rocks. "When I started getting hits, he became very jealous. I couldn't leave because he threatened to take my son Robert away from me. He spent all my money on his family and his girlfriends. Bob wanted me to fail. After my song took off that's when the beatings really started."

Lucille later recorded in Nashville enjoying several country music hits. She continued to tour the world through to the 1990s. Her marriage to

Regan was over by the mid '70s, and Lucille married Bryan Cunningham from Sarnia, Ont. "Revenge is sweet sometimes," she muses. "After all the beatings and crap that went on, I was the first woman who was inducted into the Canadian Country Music Hall of Fame."

Notes famed Canadian singer/songwriter Sylvia Tyson, "Lucille is the best female country singer Canada ever turned out. She has so much bounce and humour and what a wonderful voice. She's like a dark-haired Dolly Parton."

Reflecting on her long career, Lucille says, "When I was just a kid all I ever thought about was getting up on a stage and singing. I never thought about stardom or gold records. It's like the happy ending you read about in story books." As for the play, Lucille, who still has family in Winnipeg, is thrilled with it.

"Tracy Powers really wrote the play beautifully. One reviewer called it a jewel. I felt like I was looking from outside in. When I came home, I cried for two weeks. It's like an accident — you're fine for the moment then you realize, 'I survived this.'"