

Collins' career spans the decades

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound ..."

In 1971, a person turning on any top 40 radio station for a dose of the latest rock hits might well have been startled to hear a clear voice singing the words of the old spiritual, "Amazing Grace."

That voice belonged to Judy Collins, better known at the time for such 1960s hits as "My Father" or "Both Sides Now."

Yet Collins had a hit with "Amazing Grace" during the summer of 1971, and has been so identified with the spiritual since that she was part of Bill Moyers' 1990 documentary about the hymn.

Collins will perform "Amazing Grace," as well as a selection of other songs from her 32-year career, during two Dec. 15 performances — one at 2:30 and the other at 7:30 p.m. — at the Eastman Theatre, 26 Gibbs St.

The concerts, sponsored by the Founders Club of the Sisters of Mercy of Rochester, will benefit the sisters' Education Fund.

Collins was born in Seattle, Wash., in 1939. Her father, Chuck Collins, who was blind, was a successful radio personality. Early in her life, Collins began to help him on his radio show.

At age 5, Collins began studying classical piano. Her debut as a concert pianist came with the Denver Symphony Orchestra when she was 13.

In 1975, Collins produced and directed a documentary about her piano teacher, Antonia Brico. That documentary was nominated for an Academy Award.

At age 15, however, Collins switched from classical piano to folk music.

"I was intrigued by the folk music that I heard on the radio," Collins recalled in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier* from her Connecticut home. "I loved the lyrics."

After Collins learned guitar, she began to perform professionally as a folk singer in 1959. Her first album in 1961 was followed by 24 others, with the most recent being *Fires of Eden* in 1990.

But while she began by singing traditional folk songs, Collins' repertoire soon expanded to include works by

such contemporary folk musicians as Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell and Phil Ochs. In addition, she enjoyed success with songs by Leonard Cohen, Kurt Weill, Jacques Brel and Stephen Sondheim. Collins also scored a hit with Sondheim's "Send in the Clowns" in 1975.

Although she has written songs, Collins said she sees herself more as an interpreter of songs. "I was trained as a classical pianist," she explained. "Pianists are taught to interpret the music."

At the same time, Collins noted, she is attracted to music that is personal. "I think I'm a storyteller," she said. Thus, she noted, many of her songs deal with relationships rather than with causes or ideas.

Collins, who performs 50 to 75 concerts a year, concludes each performance with "Amazing Grace."

"I've been singing that song all my life," said Collins. The hymn — written by a slave trader who underwent a sudden conversion and freed the slaves aboard his ship — is about change in one's life, she said. The spiritual has become so renowned, she



Judy Collins is best remembered for her 1975 hit 'Send in the Clowns.'

added, because of its appeal to people of all faiths.

"It has to do with a very broad experience that happens to everybody," Collins said. "Transformations happen to everybody in many ways, so (the song) can be sung by everybody."

EDITORS' NOTE: Tickets for "The Judy Collins Holiday Show" cost \$15, \$21 and \$25, and are available through the Founders Club Box Office, 1437 Blossom Road (716/288-4817); from Ticket Express, 100 East Ave. (716/222-5000); or from TicketMaster (1-800-382-8080).

Isaiah, John the Baptist, Mary helped set path for 'pilgrim people'

By Estelle Martin, RSM
Guest contributor

The Advent season highlights our identity as a pilgrim people. It re-energizes us to push forward in our commitment to live the Gospel message. We walk in response to the risen Savior who invited us to become church.

The way is shaped by a vast array of people who emerge from the pages of Scripture to enter our lives. Isaiah, John the Baptist and Mary are three such traveling companions who walk beside us in this Advent time.

Their stories are rooted in the very heart and spirit of the Advent journey. Each longed in expectation of the coming of the Messiah. Each willingly listened to the prompting of the Spirit. Each muttered that call in prayer and proclaimed it in word and act.

If you walk with Isaiah you'll have to take long strides to keep up with him. His rugged individualism has survived the turmoil of social and pol-



itical upheaval. A person of strong convictions, Isaiah challenges us in the same voice that he called the people of Israel: "to break unjust fetters ...; to let the oppressed go free ...; to share bread with the hungry; and to shelter the homeless." (Chapter 58:6-9).

Isaiah's unwavering trust that Yahweh would never abandon the chosen people urges us to be faithful, trusting that the God who brought us to this moment will continue to journey with us.

The gaunt figure of John the Baptist leads us through overgrown paths and harsh desert wastelands. His counter-cultural lifestyle challenges us, as it did his listeners on the Jordan riverbank, to move beyond the complacency of the present: "What ought we to do?" "Let the one who has two coats give to someone who has none ...; Exact nothing over and above ...; Denounce no one falsely ..." (Luke 3:11-14).

With uncompromising conviction and clarity of purpose, John set about his task of announcing the coming of the Messiah. His single-hearted spirit inspires us to announce Christ in the marketplace. The message of the Baptist, echoing Isaiah before him, shapes the Advent experience within us: to become "A herald's voice in the desert crying, make ready the way of the

Lord, clear a straight path." (Luke 3:4; Isaiah 40:3).

Together with Mary, we "run with haste" across the hills on an errand of kindness and love. Mary's quickened pace and sense of urgency enriches the spirit of Advent expectation. The little girl of Nazareth, pregnant with her God, personifies the very image of the season. Unable to remain silent in the presence of the Word, her voice rings throughout the ages: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, and my spirit exults in God my Savior." (Luke 1:46).

We become powerfully aware of Christ's presence in our midst and we celebrate the ongoing incarnation of Emmanuel — God-with-us. To walk with Mary — and Isaiah and John — is to birth Christ to the world around us, to live as Advent people journeying in the light of God's promise fulfilled.

EDITORS' NOTE: Sister Martin is a member of the Diocesan Liturgical Commission.

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