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Donna King Conkling, of the singing King Sisters, dies at 88

By Jon Thurber, Times Staff Writer
June 22, 2007

Donna King Conkling, one of the singing King Sisters who gained fame in the 1930s and '40s in bands led by Horace Heidt and Alvino Rey, has died. She was 88.

Conkling, who also appeared on the weekly ABC-TV program "The King Family Show" in the 1960s, died Wednesday in Plano, Texas, where she had been living in recent years with her daughter, Candy Brand. She had asthma and cancer.

Donna Olivia Driggs was born Sept. 3, 1918, in the tiny farming community of Sanford, Colo. Her father, William King Driggs, was a music teacher. Times were hard for music teachers in Colorado, so the Driggs family was continually on the move, landing in Utah, Arizona, Idaho and California, where they lived in Oakland.

Three of Donna's sisters — Maxine, Luise and Alyce — formed a vocal group and began performing while in junior high school. According to the King Sisters' official website, the girls made their radio debut on Oakland station KLX in 1931.

With the Depression on, the girls' radio income was supporting the family. They moved to Salt Lake City for a better-paying job, but the station manager disliked their name, the Driggs Sisters, and demanded that they change it. They settled on King, which was part of their father's name.

By 1934, the L.A.-based bandleader Heidt had heard the sisters on a KLX broadcast and decided to hire them as special guests for his band's engagement in San Francisco. He eventually added sisters Yvonne and Donna, along with a family friend, to create "The Six King Sisters."

But when it was time to go out on the road, Heidt cut the group down to four for economic reasons. Working as a quartet, the King Sisters were made up of Yvonne, Donna, Alyce and Luise. They sang in tight, four-part harmony, with Yvonne or Alyce taking the occasional solo.

By 1938 the sisters were working with Artie Shaw's orchestra when Rey left Heidt to start his own band. Rey, who by that time had married Luise, relocated to Los Angeles, where he was offered a contract by radio station KHJ.

The sisters sang with his band until 1943, scoring several moderate hits, including a vocal version of the Glenn Miller favorite "In the Mood" that was recorded in 1939 for the RCA Records budget subsidiary called Bluebird.

"Nighty Night," recorded in 1941, also for Bluebird, with vocals by Yvonne King, became the band's theme song.

Through the 1940s, the sisters also found work in films, mainly B pictures, including "Sing Your Worries Away" starring Buddy Ebsen, "Meet the People" starring Lucille Ball and Dick Powell, and "Cuban Pete" starring Desi Arnaz.

Donna, who married James B. Conkling in 1943, had left the group by the end of the decade. Conkling, a recording industry executive, played a key role in the formation of Warner Bros. Records and served as first chairman of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences.

The couple had five children, who survive her along with 23 grandchildren and 17 great-grandchildren. Conkling died in 1998 at 83. Donna is also survived by sisters Marilyn, Maxine and Yvonne, all of whom took part in various formations of the King Sisters group.

Donna returned to appear with her siblings and other family members on the King Family television show in the mid- and late 1960s. That exposure led to a renewed interest in the group, spawning concerts with other family members.

Services are scheduled for Monday at 11 a.m. at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 14001 Burbank Blvd., Sherman Oaks.

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