

From Clinton, Missouri

Jane Froman, Missouri's First Lady of Song

Introduction

Jane Froman was a popular singer and entertainer during the 1930s through the 1950s. Injured during a tragic plane crash in 1943, Froman overcame personal tragedy and debilitating injuries to become one of the most beloved performers of her time. She had her own television show in the 1950s, where she sang and performed. She also helped many charities which served sick children.

Early Years and Education

Ellen Jane Froman was born on November 10, 1907, in **University City, Missouri**. Her parents, Elmer Ellsworth Froman and Anna T. Barcafer, separated when Jane was five. Shortly thereafter, young Jane began to stutter, a problem she experienced all her life except when she sang. She spent her childhood in Clinton, Missouri, with her mother and the extended Barcafer family.

Froman and her mother moved to Columbia, Missouri, in 1919. Anna Froman, a professional pianist, taught music, first at Christian College (now Columbia College) and then at Stephens College. In 1926 Jane Froman graduated from Christian College and later briefly attended the University of Missouri's School of Journalism. She moved to Ohio and studied voice at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music from 1928 to 1930.

A Career in Show Business

While in Cincinnati, Froman started singing on the radio and doing commercials at the WLW radio studios. While working at WLW, Froman met Don Ross, a staff singer and former vaudeville performer. For a time, they sang together. Don assisted Jane in her career and arranged auditions for her, eventually becoming her manager. They moved to New York City in January 1933 and married in September of that year.

Froman's career began to take off, and in 1934 numerous polls throughout the country voted her the number one girl singer on the air. Froman went to Hollywood several times during the 1930s to film a handful of movies, including *Stars Over Broadway* and *Radio City Revels*. Despite great efforts to correct her stuttering, Froman's acting career was short-lived.

As a singer, however, Froman's vocals remained in demand. During the 1930s, she kept busy singing on the radio and at New York nightclubs, as well as performing on

Broadway and recording music. In 1937 and 1939, Americans again voted her the nation's top female performer. While the singer's star continued to rise, her husband's did not. He constantly lived in her shadow, and this slowly caused a rift in their marriage.

Tragedy Strikes

In 1941 Froman began entertaining troops and performing in USO (United Service Organization) shows at camps and military hospitals around the country. She was one of the first performers to volunteer to entertain soldiers overseas. On February 22, 1943, on the way to her first USO show in Europe, the Pan American Airways plane carrying Jane and thirty-eight others crashed into the Tagus River in Lisbon, Portugal.

Froman was one of only fifteen survivors, and her injuries were many. They included a large gash below her knee, which nearly severed her left leg and a fracture of her right leg so severe that doctors strongly considered amputating it. Froman successfully fought to keep her leg, but she had to wear a leg brace the rest of her life. During the crash, she had also suffered broken ribs and multiple fractures to her right arm.

Froman spent two months recovering in Portugal. During this time, she became acquainted with John Burn, an officer on the plane. He had helped save her life while they waited in the water to be rescued.

Making a Comeback

Showing great courage and willpower, Froman worked hard to continue her career as she battled lifelong medical problems resulting from the crash. Although unable to walk, Froman appeared in the show Artists and Models eight months after the accident. A wheelchair was used to accommodate her performance, and the gowns she wore were designed to hide her scars.

In 1945 Froman decided to return to Europe to entertain troops. For three months, she performed on crutches for 30,000 servicemen, and her courageous appearances inspired them all.

Returning to New York, Froman continued singing and performing while undergoing many surgeries. Over the course of her lifetime, she would endure an estimated thirty-nine operations.

During this time, Froman had stayed in contact with the pilot John Burn, and he often visited her in the hospital while she was recovering from an operation. Burn

had fully recovered from the broken back he received when their plane crashed and had returned to work at the airline. Upon her divorce from Don Ross in February 1948, Froman married Burn the next month in Coral Gables, Florida.

All of the medical complications Froman experienced during the 1940s eventually took their toll on her mental health. In 1949 she entered the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, to be treated for depression. The entertainer greatly benefitted from the care she received at the clinic during her six-month stay.

In 1952 Twentieth Century Fox made *With a Song in My Heart*, a movie about Froman's life. While Susan Hayward played the starring role, Froman's voice was used for the musical numbers. Also that year, Froman was given her own television show, *USA Canteen*. It was later renamed *The Jane Froman Show*.

Throughout the early 1950s, Froman and Burn tried to make their marriage work, but Froman continued to struggle with her health and the pressures of performing. The couple separated in 1955 and divorced the next year.

Froman revisited the Menninger Clinic in 1955 and was given a guided tour of the grounds. Shortly after, she was asked to serve on the Menninger Foundation's Board of Governors. She happily accepted the position and remained on the board until her death. In 1957 money from her many fan clubs helped to start the Jane Froman Foundation, which assisted the children's hospital at the Menninger Clinic.

Froman kept singing and making television appearances until she retired from show business in 1961. The singer's talents had earned her three separate stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for her work in radio, recordings, and television.

Returning Home

After retiring, Froman returned home to Columbia, Missouri, where she became reacquainted with a former college friend, Rowland H. Smith, the assistant managing editor for the *Columbia Tribune*. The two found that they enjoyed each other's company and shared many common interests. They were married on June 22, 1962.

While she had helped many charities throughout her career, retirement allowed Jane Froman to devote even more time to charity work and community activities, including the Easter Seals campaign and the Missouri Mental Health Association. Froman came out of retirement in 1969 to sing in a Christmas program at Arrow Rock, Missouri. The program benefitted the Jane Froman Music Camp, a project started to help young people develop their musical talent.

Jane died of heart failure in Columbia, Missouri, on April 22, 1980. She was 72 years old.

Jane Froman's Legacy

Jane Froman brought hope and provided inspiration to millions of people around the world. Her unselfish devotion to others, despite her own physical and emotional pain, continues to inspire. Each fall, members of Jane Froman fan clubs throughout the United States and the rest of the world continue to visit Columbia, Missouri, to honor her. On the weekend of November 9–11, 2007, a Jane Froman Centennial celebration was held to honor Froman, who would have been 100 years old. During the celebration, Mayor Darwin Hindman of Columbia declared November 10, 2007 “Jane Froman Day.”

Source: State Historical Society of Missouri

Captions

Jane Froman, 1907-1980

Jane performing for the troops

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The Jane Froman Show, 1950s

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Throughout the ordeal, she performed beautifully, and as successfully as ever, courageously, and inspired injured military overseas by continuing her USO commitments, over 90 concerts! On crutches herself, she sang on battlefields, to wounded soldiers and "With a Song in Her Heart". At one point, under the elegant gowns she wore so beautifully, were hidden props and struts, like a doll stand, to help her achieve a normal, morale-boosting, glamorous appearance.

It was 39 surgeries before she was ok. And she herself with horrible moments of despair along the way.

Once asked to name the ten best female singers, the renowned musical producer Billy Rose replied, “There is Jane Froman and nine others.” A legend in her time, Jane Froman (1907–1980) was one of Missouri's greatest success stories. Her singing

career, which spanned over three decades, included radio and television, recordings, nightclub performances, Broadway shows, and Hollywood movies.

This excellent CD offers us all the songs from two of Jane's albums, "Songs at Sunset" and "Faith." Even if you're not terribly religious, you might want to listen to Jane sing these faith-based songs and ballads simply because she performs them so skillfully. Jane always sang straight from the heart and I'm every bit as impressed as her audiences were!

SENIOR MOMENTS ARCHIVES