



June LeBell

April 30, 2017

Even in "retirement" in Sarasota, June LeBell never stepped far away from a microphone.

After an early start as a professional singer, she turned her love for classical music into a groundbreaking career on WQXR in New York, where she became the first female announcer for a commercial classical music station in the country. And she carried on as the host of lecture series and radio shows and as an arts leader after she moved to Sarasota in 2002.

Before her death Sunday after a long battle with ovarian cancer, LeBell built up a popular conversation series, "Music Mondays," for the Sarasota Institute for Lifetime Learning that outgrew its longtime home in Holley Hall, and regularly attracted more than 900 people each week after moving to Church of the Palms. She wrote music reviews for The Observer newspaper group, and hosted "June LeBell's Musical Conversation" for two years on the classical radio station WSMR.

"She had a way of burrowing into a community," said her husband, Edward Alley, who first met LeBell in the early 1980s during a radiothon fundraiser for the New York Philharmonic, where he was the manager. "She did so much for so many. She changed the complexion of classical music radio from being stodgy to being friendly and open and warm."

LeBell's passing came one day after her 73rd birthday and a day before the couple's eighth wedding anniversary.

A graduate of the High School of Music and Art in New York and the Hartt College of Music, LeBell was offered a job at WQXR, the classical station owned for many years by The New York Times, in 1972.

"I thought I can use everything I've ever learned about the voice and classical music and languages and make money at it, and really have a career," she told the Herald-Tribune in 2014.

During her nearly 30 years there, she interviewed thousands of artists, celebrities and politicians, from Beverly Sills and Luciano Pavarotti to Rudolph Giuliani, Jacques d'Amboise and Marvin Hamlisch. She even got many of them to share recipes for her 1992 book "Kitchen Classics from the Philharmonic."

She also brought an intense curiosity and personality to her work.

"She was such a sparkling character. She had such a great love of life and a love of people and music and art in general," said Joseph Holt, who became artistic director of Gloria Musicae in 2008 while LeBell was serving as executive director.

The 9/11 attacks triggered her move to Sarasota. She recalled being thrown from her bed by the force of the planes slamming into World Trade Center just a few blocks from her Manhattan apartment. She was forced out of her home for more than three months and decided it was time to leave the city.

Her retirement was brief. Not long after arriving in Sarasota, she became the programming director at the Glenridge retirement center and sang with Gloria Musicae. She also served on the boards of directors of numerous organizations.

Despite a busy schedule, she also made time for friends.

"She never seemed to give less than 1,000 percent to everything she did, whether a friendship, a lecture, or a review or a dinner party," said Joan Golub, a close friend. "She was fiercely loyal in her friendships as she was in her determination to live her life to the fullest. And she never quit until she no longer had the energy to do it and that's just been in the last couple of weeks. She was the kind of friend that you knew if you needed her, she was there, and those friendships are hard to come by."

D'Amboise — the former New York City Ballet star, a decade her senior — first came to know LeBell when she was a child. Her father, Irving LeBell, was pediatrician for the dancer's children and frequently asked his daughter to perform during social gatherings in their home.

"Irving and his wife, Harriette, swelled and pulsed with pride every time they spoke of June," d'Amboise recalled in an email. "She was not yet a teenager, but she already had the stage presence and aplomb of an opera star. Music was always center to their family and music was the sea that June felt most comfortable in."

D'Amboise was among the many celebrities who appeared in LeBell's lecture programs.

Alley and LeBell reconnected not long after he moved to Sarasota with his

wife, the singer Nancy Williams. A few years after Williams' death, he had his first date with LeBell at a party on the stage of the Sarasota Opera House.

"June and I were blessed with eight years of what everybody hopes to have," Alley said. "In every sort of way, it was an absolutely wonderful relationship. We were best friends. We had a wonderful time working together. It was almost a fairy tale romance. We just loved being together."

Alley said LeBell believed "that the more you give, the more you get. Her legacy is the good will and love that she gave to so many people and that was returned I think." Her Facebook page has been filled with hundreds of tributes since news of her death was posted there Sunday evening.

She inspired many in recent years with her open and frank Facebook postings about the ups and downs of her cancer treatments, through a long period of remission to a reoccurrence within the last six months.

Last week, she sent a note to friends that her chemotherapy treatments were no longer working and that Hospice had been called to her Sarasota home.

"I've been very blessed and lucky through all this. I was able to work through 10 of 12 SILL lectures and write reviews most of the winter season," she wrote. "But this is no quality of life." She had already completed planning for another season of SILL lectures, Alley said.

In addition to Alley, she is survived by an older sister, Barbara of Simi Valley, two nephews, Andrew and Robin Joseph, a cousin Paige Farr of Sarasota, and many other cousins and her beloved toy poodle, Rosy.

A funeral service will be held at 2 p.m. May 8 at Church of the Palms, 3224 Bee Ridge Road, Sarasota.

Interment will be held Thursday, May 11th, at 11:00am, at Sarasota National Cemetery, 9810 State Rd. 72, Sarasota, FL 34241.

Instead of flowers, contributions may be made to Sarasota Orchestra, Sarasota Opera or Tidewell Hospice.

~ Staff writer Carrie Seidman contributed to this report.

Tribute Wall



“ Sincere condolences are extended to the family and friends at this sad time. Be comforted by prayers and memories shared together. Wait on God to erase the effects of sin and death, making eternal life in paradise possible. John :3:16

May 13, 2017 at 12:00 AM



“ A tremendous loss to Sarasota with June's passing. I met her 10 years ago at USF where she taught a class in Opera. She was without a doubt the coolest woman I ever met! I will miss her terribly along with everyone else. Deepest sympathy to Ed.

Roberta Sheffer - May 10, 2017 at 12:00 AM



“ I express my sincere condolences. May God give you Peace, Comfort, and Courage to face the days ahead & Loving Memories to forever hold in your Heart. Psalms 29:11

M - May 06, 2017 at 12:00 AM



“ Sorry to hear the news of the passing of June. Our deep sympathy to you and your family during this difficult time. May the "God of all comfort" help you cope and give you stength and peace. 2 Corenthians 1:3,4

A B - May 04, 2017 at 12:00 AM



“ *In 1962, June and I were among the first group of ushers at the opening of Philharmonic Hall. We worked at adjacent doors on the Loge level. I will always remember her wonderful singing and speaking voice. Peace, Louise Montag*

May 04, 2017 at 12:00 AM