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LIFESTYLE

Duluth native found success recording music in Los Angeles

Ethel Podolor's eyes are bright. You really can't take your own eyes off of them. And then there's her smile. And the general grace she emanates. Family members are prodding her. "Who wrote the song Grandma?" one of them asks. "The Duluth song." "O...

Written By: Mike Creger | Jan 10th 2016 - 12am.





Ethel Podolor's eyes are bright. You really can't take your own eyes off of them. And then there's her smile. And the general grace she emanates.

Family members are prodding her.

"Who wrote the song Grandma?" one of them asks. "The Duluth song."

"Oh, my father."

"Will you sing it for us?"

"I'll sing it," she says, her expressions growing even brighter. "We grew up singing it."

Ethel Podolor was 102 when her family made the recording in 2012. She sang, "Be sure to come to Duluth, boys" and the rest of the first verse of "Duluth," written by her father, Ima Mistachkin, in 1911.

And she sang it in perfect key.

Ethel died in December at age 106, putting to rest a life that was dominated by music. It was quite a ride from vaudeville to classic piano, flamenco guitar, rock-a-billy, Steppenwolf and Three Dog Night.

And it all started in Duluth.

Her father, who was in the furniture store business, was also a theater promoter and performer in Duluth. He was a popular act for "illustrated song" performances in the 1910s. Still images from handpainted glass plates would be projected behind the singer, a type of live music video in the vaudeville days popularized by Fanny Brice, Eddie Cantor and Norma Talmadge.

It was a way to promote sheet music, and Mistachkin had his own to tout in the local tribute to Duluth.

"My father wrote that song when I was still crawling around the house," Ethel says in the video. She told family members over the years that her father became popular for the song that was meant to "boost Duluth," and he was recognized when the family went out in public.



late 1960s and early 1970s.

Go west

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She got to L.A. after marrying Mike Podolor at age 19. She had plenty of suitors, her son Richie Podolor said. “She was the belle of the ball. People apparently gravitated toward her.”

Before leaving Duluth, she endured a bit of a checkered family life, something she talked little of the rest of her life. She liked to stay on the positive side, Richie said.

Her father left the family, leaving his wife with five children. They eventually moved in with their grandmother, Richie said, who spoiled Ethel and didn’t pay much attention to the rest of the children. Cooper said Ethel’s only surviving sibling, Millie, confirms the favoritism.

There was just something different about Ethel, Richie said.

She graduated from Central High School in 1927. She taught kindergarten and piano lessons before meeting Mike, marrying and moving to California.

The Podolors opened a used car lot in Los Angeles. It soon became the largest such business in the city. Ethel was Mike’s “adding machine,” and the two made a great personal and business partnership, Richie said.

They were adaptable, he said. When they found out that a land investment included a cache of clay soils, they developed a brick factory with other family investors.

Key change

That adaptability would come in handy when Richie was discovered as a virtuoso guitar player in the 1950s. Ethel schooled him in classical piano, but he switched to guitar in time to catch the crossroads



MIKE and ETHEL saw an opportunity. The car business was changing as more dealerships ran their own used lots. They decided to bank on Richie's success and open a recording studio, American Recording Company. In 1959, it was just the second independently run studio in L.A., coming in the wake of Gold Star Studios, made famous by Phil Spector. The scene was dominated by record companies.

But if you were ready to record something, American Recording was the place to go, Richie said. They ran a no-nonsense, drop-in business. Cooper, a neighbor to the Podolors, became an engineer. Mike, who always had an interest in gadgets, helped the studio evolve to become the first with all solid-state components.

Studios needed innovators, Cooper said, because there were no standards. Things were evolving with each session.

"Mike had that American can-do spirit," Cooper said.

Don Podolor, Richie's brother, became a booking agent, getting concert dates for bands.

Richie's role came in shaping artist's sounds and often simply playing guitar in the background. He eventually got the title of producer after so many artists craved his expertise.

Throughout the 1960s, he sat in studios as a musician or engineer for Donovan, The Turtles, Electric Prunes, The Monkees and The Grateful Dead.

And then there was Ethel.

"She charmed all the people," Cooper said.

"The whole industry respected her," Richie said.

Ethel was a rarity in the business not only as a woman running the show, Richie said. "For being in the record business, she was really classy."

She always said you have "blow your own horn," Cooper said.

Ethel was the face of the business and had that ear, offering "pearls of wisdom" on recordings, he said. That was important because American Recording was looking for songs that would appeal to the "average American."



“Richie and I knew exactly when we had recorded a hit record,” Cooper said, “But it was nice to have it validated by Ethel. She really did have the common ear, which was amazing for someone her age.”

Hit factory

They were a real mom-and-pop operation that prided itself on hard work and little of the nonsense that comes with the music scene, Richie said. Ethel kept them in line. There was no carousing. There was always the next session, he said.

There are a lot of egos and artistic visions to navigate, Richie said, comparing his work to being a psychologist at times.

“We never had an ego,” he said of the studio staff.

Things took a dramatic turn by the late 1960s.

“All of a sudden, two young guys come in,” Richie said. One was a drummer with a band called Steppenwolf. He liked the sound the studio produced and convinced his group to record its first album there despite plans for another studio.

American Recording’s position in the music business would be forever altered.

“We must have been the missing ingredient,” Cooper said. “Because the studio and engineers were the only thing different - and a hit album, including “Born To Be Wild,” was recorded and mixed in three days.”

Then came Three Dog Night, Blues Image and Iron Butterfly. Groups recorded in the Podolor studio dominated the charts in 1969 through 1970 with albums featuring the songs “One,” “Joy to the World,” “Mama Told Me Not to Come,” “Born to Be Wild,” “Magic Carpet Ride” and “Ride Captain Ride.”

They collected a catalog that even today is one of the most-licensed you will find, Cooper said, as the songs continue to be used in films and other media.



every time months for nearly a decade.

It was demanding, Richie said, and no one handled things with such aplomb as his mother.

There was a time when the studio got behind on a project backed by David Geffen, one of the most powerful people in the music business by the early 1970s. Someone would need to break the news to him. The studio needed more time.

“Everybody was afraid to talk to Geffen,” Richie said. And even if you got the nerve, you couldn’t just call him up.

Ethel said she’d do it. They knew each other on a first-name basis, Richie said, and his mother “saved my neck.” She had “chutzpah,” he said.

Memory

Richie said he would often have to stop and appreciate the opportunity he had in working with his parents. “You take it for granted,” he said. “She was my business partner.”

“We’re proud of what we did,” Richie said.

But Ethel was also her unique self, he said. “It’s a very big loss.”

Ethel and Mike retired and traveled. Grandchildren spent a lot of time looking after them in their later years. Mike died in 2000.

Cooper clipped through the family history in the eulogy he delivered at Ethel’s funeral in December.

“As Ethel’s memory started to fade,” he said, “I noticed something remarkable. She couldn’t remember what we just had for lunch an hour ago but would tell me something that happened 90 years ago like it was yesterday.”

One such memory passed down in family lore is that Ethel’s aunt Sadie was a good friend of Beatty Zimmerman, mother of Bob Dylan. Ethel’s family was part of a tight-knit group of Jewish immigrants



SOJOURN TO NEW YORK CITY IN 1961.

“I hear it worked out pretty good,” Cooper said.

As fate would have it, one of ARC’s latter-day clients was Dylan’s son, Jakob Dylan, who recorded his first album there in 1991 with the Wallflowers.

And then there’s that “Duluth” song Ethel never forgot. Richie has heard a lot about it in the past few weeks since Ethel died on Dec. 5.

He muses on how genetics played a part in his life, that musical bug that his mother instilled in him.

“There is something to that,” he said. She gave him an early confidence that led to all the opportunities six decades ago.

You have to think, he said, “Why was I loving music so much?”

“When you once come to Duluth, boys, you’ll hate to go away,” Ethel sang in 2012. “If you do, you’ll come back - even walk the train tracks - and say ‘I’m home to stay.’ ”

American Recording Company clients

Richie Podolor and the American Recording Company worked with dozens of hit artists. Here is a sampling:

- Produced Three Dog Night, Steppenwolf, Blues Image, Alice Cooper, Souther Hillman Furay, Phil Seymour, Iron Butterfly, The Dillards. Three Dog Night had 18 consecutive top 20 singles and three No. 1 singles: “Joy To The World,” “Black And White,” and “Shambala.” They were the first rock band to do an entire concert tour in sports stadiums and the first group to host the “New Year’s Rockin’ Eve” with Dick Clark in its inaugural airing in 1972.
- As a guitar player, Podolor released many instrumental singles in the early 1960s and two instrumental surf albums as Richie Allen and The Pacific Surfers.
- ARC had clients such as Fleetwood Mac, Don Henley, Heart, Kenny Rogers and The First Edition, The Turtles, Phish and hundreds of others.

Ethel online

[Click here to watch Ethel Podolor sing her father’s song, “Duluth.”](#)

‘Duluth’ sheet music

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1 / 14 The song "Duluth" is on file in the archives at the Minnesota Historical Society and the library at the University of Minnesota Duluth. (Minnesota Historical Society files)

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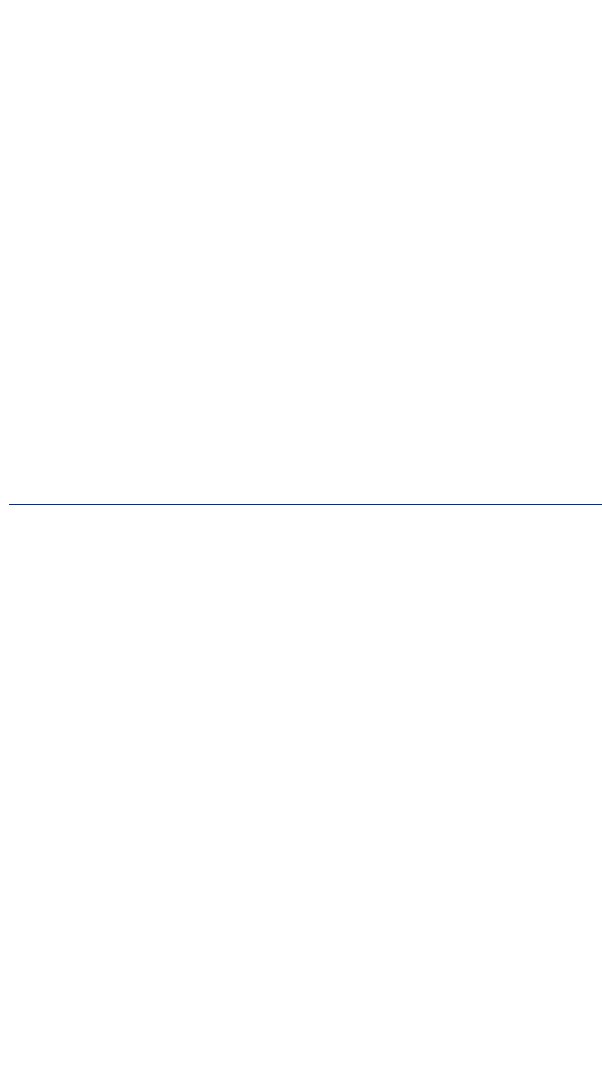
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