

Sizing up
Actresses who are big — as in Rubenesque — are suddenly big on Broadway and in Hollywood | **B8**



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The power of poetry



Karen Hunley-Piher, left, Jean Jay, Sue Mogan-Mattison, Kate McSweeney and MJ Abell

PHOTO COURTESY OF CHRISTINA MERRILL

► *Echoes of the Heart*, \$17.95, is available at the Unity Church of Christianity bookstore, 4211 Malze Rd.; Phoenix Books, 3110 N. High St.; Gentle Wind, 4695 Morse Rd.; Feed Your Spirit, 3292 N. High St.; and Great Expectations, 179 S. Market St., Logan, Ohio; and www.voicesofprayer.com/eoh.

Women get chance to express hopes, fears on compact-disc project

By Mike Harden
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Compensation for their poetry does not pay the mortgage or feed the baby. It feeds the soul. The nine local women earn their daily bread in a variety of jobs — music teacher, city employee, technical writer for wireless communications.

"We wanted to find material that would resonate with women," said Walter Watkins, a Worthington retiree who produced and directed *Echoes of the Heart*, a compact-disc sampler of poetry, song and spiritual supplication.

"The connective thread is finding expressions of love and relationships. What we have is love lost, love expressed and unexpressed, growth through healing."

Local poet MJ Abell recalled, "I was told they wanted a collection of poems by women, for women and reflecting many facets from women's lives. I knew it was a really wide net."

Abell wrote several of the 26 pieces included in *Echoes*. She used verse to episodically explore womanhood's chronology — woman as daughter, lover, wife and mother.

The mother of three and a technical writer by trade, Abell said, "I think it is a very soothing CD. I hope that people are stimulated and relaxed, because I find myself reaching down and getting to a

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deeper place when I listen to it."

"It is just an opportunity to listen to poetry in a different format and from a different angle than you might have considered," Watkins said. "We wanted to create an intimate listening experience that allows the listener to be part of the poem."

"We wanted to add original music that would support the ideas but not get in the way."

To that end, each piece is read to a backdrop of original compositions written and performed by local musicians Jim Curis and Jim Luellen.

"I think it's very cool that men are producing this women's project," *Echoes* contributor Sue Mogan-Mattison said of Watkins, musicians Curis and Luellen, and Jack Rees, who conceived *Echoes*.

Mogan-Mattison, who teaches music for Columbus schools and is known locally as a singer and songwriter, had the chance to explore poetry by contributing to *Echoes*.

Inspired by a phrase of poet Maya Angelou ("But still I rise"), Mogan-Mattison's poem *Borne Into the Light* muses over the experience of coming to America for blacks and for her Irish-

rooted ancestors.

"When blacks were brought over here," Mogan-Mattison said, "they didn't have any choice. The Irish were one of the first groups of free immigrants to come over. Both were at the bottom rungs of the ladder when they came over here, and they were the first groups to go through oppression."

"Those two groups understand oppression. They ended up working together in a lot of places where no one else would work, and they've all worked their way up to a higher place on the ladder."

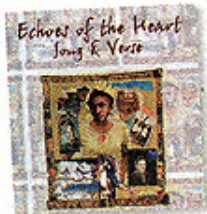
Sharon West, a former broadcast journalist and now director of music and ministerial services at Unity Church of Christianity, was selected to read the poems that Mogan-Mattison, Abell and others composed.

"I was guided by the integrity of their work," West said. "It is amazing work."

The power of *Echoes*, West suggested, is derived from the women's willingness to plumb "that inner litany, those inner conversations. I am lonely. I am ostracized. I wish I had said this or I wish I had done that. How do you express love? What's needed?"

"It's amazing to me that they could get together so much that is all so powerful."

Producer Watkins said he be-



Borne Into the Light

by Sue Mogan-Mattison

I am beaten down, but still I rise
Out of the earth of which I am part.
I gain strength from unworried ties,
From the depths of a burdened heart.

Unfettered are my mind and soul,
Flesh and bone don't cry.
A slave they will not make me
If I decide to fly.

Still I rise to maiden heights
And leave them all behind.
I stand on mountains of mortal ash
And proclaim my peace of mind.
I stand with all the world's
oppressed;

Our union in one, strong,
Our story knows no color;
It knows no joyful song.

Still I rise, and in the end
My life will not be owned.
And peace will lie about me;
My spirit be enthroned.
And I will be the noble queen
Of land that is my soul.
When I am borne into the light
as darkness takes its toll

gan gathering works for *Echoes* simply by asking friends: "Who do you know that writes?"

Yet he refused to ask of would-be contributors, "Are you trained as a writer, and what have you published?"

"We began to put the word out and got quite a few submissions."

Much of the material concerns healing and reconciliation.

One of Abell's poems (*Rocking You After Midnight*) evolved after she stood over the crib of her 2-week-old sleeping son and watched his lips move as though in some secret conversation:

You raise your eyebrows in sleep,
conversing with the baby
souls still waiting
for bodies. Only you know
how far
you've come to be here, how
long
you waited for that first angry
cry while still half
inside me. Sorry to interrupt
your dreams.

What do you tell those
drifting souls
of the world you've known
these two weeks? Do you say
we love sometimes well, some-
times poorly? We hurt
each other, we try to make
things right. All of us
in this house sleep too little,
yell

My Mother's Jumpers

by MJ Abell

In her bedroom
my mother sewed jumpers
encircled us with her yellow tape
mended our pants.
We grew up amid doll quilts,
tammy clothes that matched our own,
ric-rac trim and searches
for her thimble.
Snips of thread ran through our rugs
like lost veins.

While her machine gathered our
sleeves into cuffs
traced our middles to make a dress
of a bodice and a skirt,
I lolled on her high bed with the cherry
posts,
keeping her company
as the Venetian blinds striped the wall,
the stale smell of passion safe
beneath the white chenille spread.

She never told us she loved us
not straight out.
I grew up thinking those were words
for when the bedspread lay folded
back —
love for children was assumed
like the cup of water I boiled for my
father
as soon as I got up.
How could she know we'd search our
childhoods
for a single phrase?

I think about her
when I draw the covers about my son,
practice telling him I love him
while he is too small to know
I am still trying out the phrase
tugging its seams
searching its pockets.

too much.
Tell those baby souls
it is worth coming, but none
of them
will end up the straight tree
mapped
into their unsown seeds. Tell
them outside
our kitchen window a robin
weaves
a complicated swirl from
skimpy gatherings —
beaks of mulch, string,
mouthfuls
of dry brown discards, a luck
find
of bright cord. Tell them the
world
is such a nest.

For such poems as that, Watkins explained, "We put long spaces between the tracks to a low the listener's mind to gath itself and reflect upon how what they've just heard applied to their life."

"There is no religious message intended, even though there are prayers within the set of poems."

Powerful as *Echoes* might be Watkins implied that it is not intended to be a road map to inner peace for listeners.

"Rarely are we wise enough to know how someone else's spiritual path should develop or evolve," he said.

"But we can share our stories."

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