

CONCERT | PREVIEW

Making a joyful noise

When Ernestine Dillard sings 'God Bless America,' she's praying

BY MATT GLEASON
World Scene Writer

Local gospel singer Ernestine Dillard believes "God Bless America," like the Lord's prayer, is a plea to the almighty.

You see, that patriotic hymn Dillard is nationally renowned for singing, asks God to bless the country she loves, and to stand beside and guide it through the night with his light from above.

In the wake of tragedies, such as the Oklahoma City bombing and Sept. 11, Dillard sang that Irving Berlin-composed anthem and witnessed light shine through darkness.

The 63-year-old has sung her towering version of "God Bless America" for two presidents and performed it as far afield as Switzerland.

On Friday, Dillard will perform "God Bless America" and other songs during "DIVAS 2004, One Night Only" at the Tulsa Performing Arts Center.

The fund-raiser is hosted by the Health Outreach Prevention Education (H.O.P.E.). Proceeds from the event will help support H.O.P.E.

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**DIVAS 2004,
ONE NIGHT ONLY**

When: 7 p.m., Friday

Where: Doenges Theater, Tulsa PAC, Second Street and Cincinnati Avenue

Admission: \$10, \$20 for individual seats, \$40 per seat at eight-person cabaret tables, available at the PAC box office, 596-7111, 749-8378 or www.tulsapac.com.



Tulsa World file photos

When Divas walked the earth

"DIVAS 2004, One Night Only," features (clockwise from top right) Annie Ellicott, Rusti Love, Rebecca Ungerman, Cindy Cain, Pam Van Dyke-Crosby, Ernestine Dillard and Mary Cogan.

Eye

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fine art was something only the very rich could afford. Naturally, artists worked to make paintings that their patrons wanted: portraits and historical paintings for kings and princes, biblical scenes for the churches.

"There was less interest in the natural world in those days," Peck said. "But, with the coming of the Renaissance and the rise of humanism, people became more interested in the world around. And the development of perspective in art, and the expressiveness of oil painting, allowed artists to create works that could be more 'real-looking.'"

Still-life paintings first came into vogue in the Netherlands, which in the 16th century was a wealthy and powerful country, one willing to translate some of that wealth into art. However, the beautifully lush images of flowers and other interior scenes were contrary to the Calvinist tenets of self-denial.

This led to the genre of "veritas,"

paintings that mixed images of death and decay into visually stimulating still-life scenes, often arranged in compositions that seemed to teeter on the edge of catastrophe.

"In other countries like Spain and Italy, still-life painting was more purely decorative," Peck said. "The moralizing tone in some Dutch art just isn't there. These paintings were more a chance for artists to play with light and color."

Still-life painting was still considered the least prestigious artistic activity, ranking below landscape painting in the esteem of art critics and buyers, because such pictures were thought to be incapable of conveying deep ideas.

But just as landscape slowly evolved from the backdrop to historic, religious or mythical scenes into a subject worthy of serious artistic exploration, so did still-lives move from being the decorative elements in portraits and narrative paintings to a discipline all its own, complete with subgenres.

The term "trompe l'oeil painting" was coined in the 18th century to describe a particular species of still-life – paintings designed to trick the

eye into seeing more dimensions than were actually present.

The development of perspective created the illusion of the picture being a window to another world, one that appears to receding into the distance.

Trompe l'oeil painting, on the other hand, tries to achieve the opposite illusion – that the painting is a flat surface from which the central image appears to emerge out toward the viewer.

Both still-life and trompe l'oeil paintings found some of their most ardent proponents in 19th-century America.

"Americans really took to still-life painting, and they loved trompe l'oeil," Peck said. "American artists were traveling to Europe and seeing for the first time things like the great paintings of the Dutch masters, and they began applying these ideas to their own paintings."

"While you can see a relationship between the two, it's also easy to see a definite American character to some of these paintings," he said. "The images are just as crisp and precise as those of the old Dutch painters, yet there is a sense

of minimalism to the images. Things are more spare and stark."

Still, if there is one thing that sets trompe l'oeil paintings apart from other still-life works, it would be the sense of humor evident in the paintings.

That is one of the defining characteristics of the Trompe L'oeil Society, Peck said.

"There's really a playfulness to a lot of these paintings," Peck said, stopping by a image of the Disney character Goofy. "But there's also a seriousness to this work. One of the tenets of trompe l'oeil painting is that there be internal shadows in the image. The artists require that the painting be lit in such a way that it appears as if the museum's lights are creating the shadow."

Shadows within the picture frame is just one of the four rules for trompe l'oeil painting. The others are that image should appear to project outward from the frame of the picture, that objects should overlap one another to create a sense of depth, and that the objects in the painting appear life-size.

"That's one reason why the paintings in the Trompe L'oeil

Society part of the show are relatively small," Peck said. "They are painting things like children's blocks, pencils, letters."

Some artists go so far as to include actual objects in their images – a real postage stamp placed next to a painted facsimile, one half of a \$5 bill joined to the hand-painted other half.

"It's almost as if the artists are teasing the viewer to try and pick out – or even pick up – the 'real' object from the painted one," Peck said.

Then, there's something like Eric Conklin's "H.M.S. Victory," which is an anamorphic painting. Anamorphic art distorts a conventional image in a way that one has to look at a painting in some way other than straight on to see it.

Conklin's piece has a reflective cylinder set in the middle of a circular image that is like some sort of turntable accident.

"We haven't got the piece installed yet, so I don't know exactly how it will work," Peck said. "But when it is set up, the artist said, there will be one definite point where the viewer has to stand in order to see the painting."

Divas

Continued from page 13

programs, such as prevention education about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, the statewide 24-hour HIV/AIDS hotline, and the only free, anonymous testing and counseling facility in northeastern Oklahoma.

The show will feature an all-star lineup that includes Rebecca

Ungerman, Rusti Love, Mary Cogan, Cindy Cain, John Sawyer, Pam Van Dyke-Crosby and Annie Ellicot.

In Dillard's 34 years of nursing, this wife of a Methodist pastor came to understand music's medicinal properties.

"Because of my spiritual background I believe that music has the ability to heal," she said. "I think that singing, or playing an instrument, does something innate, something you can't touch

or feel, to help the body be restored."

She said, "the same compassion and love" that goes into helping someone with their "hands and knowledge" also relates to music.

"I believe with all my heart that it comes out through the person," she said. "If you haven't reached that, you may be a great entertainer and you may have an awesome talent, but until you put into your heart that part, you don't reach people the same."

At a time when some question America's policies both abroad and at home, Dillard said the song has particular relevance.

Sometimes when she sings it these days, "even people who don't profess to be so patriotic" mention how it affects them.

"I go to groups with people who have axes to grind until they realize what this nation is all about," she said. "They are moved by that song. There's something very special in this song. As I said, it's a

prayer. People cry. Men cry."

It makes Dillard cry, too.

"Almost every time I hear the music start up," she said, "I have to hold back and remember that I'm there to sing that song and not to stand there and weep."

If Dillard could, she said she would stand atop the Statue of Liberty and belt out "God Bless America" for all to hear "until we come to the realization that we are so blessed."

"We-are-so-blessed."

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