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Canandaigua resident preserves sister's soulful legacy

Suzette S. Norris

Several years ago, longtime Canandaigua resident Betty Stahlbrodt made a discovery that few people in town know about. She was with her husband, Peter, and sister, Bonnie Vahey, visiting their childhood home, which was on an annual house tour.

"We walked into the den and Peter, who loves music — especially the blues — started looking at the pictures on the wall," Stahlbrodt says, who remembers her husband whispering in her ear as the new owner described her extensive folk art collection. "He said, 'I think her brother is Taj Mahal,' and he was blown away by that."

The three had just discovered Connie Fredericks-Malone, a member of a family that has profoundly influenced 20th-century blues and roots music. Fredericks-Malone is the sister of both multiple-Grammy-Award winner Taj Mahal and of the late Carole Fredericks, whose soulful voice made her an icon in France and worldwide.

A professional actress and singer herself with a unique music project of her own, Fredericks-Malone and her husband, Jim Malone, left New York City and moved to Canandaigua eight years ago after attending a bridal shower in the area.

In the quiet of Canandaigua, she says, the moving voice of Americana can still be heard.

"I say God takes care of children and fools. From this spot, Jim and I can do whatever we need to do. I don't think any other place would be as perfect," she explains.

Fredericks-Malone, 60, shares some of the playful, joyful, soulful expressions of her famous brother, who has recorded with the likes of Miles Davis and the Rolling Stones. In 2008, Taj, now 66, celebrated his 40th anniversary as a professional performer.

Fredericks-Malone's parents left Harlem shortly after their first son, Henry St. Claire Fredericks (now known as Taj Mahal), was born in 1942, and headed for the factory town of Springfield, Mass. Her father was a classically trained jazz pianist of Caribbean descent and her mother a gospel-singing schoolteacher from the same small South Carolina town that produced Dizzy Gillespie.

Both parents took jobs, sacrificing their music to raise their five children "so the next generation could have a better life," she recalls. But "there was always some kind of music, singing and carrying on going on in that house."

Fredericks-Malone's father died in an accident when she was only 5. Her mother later remarried a Jamaican man who played Caribbean music on his guitar. He brought three children of his own, and the marriage produced another child, raising the number of siblings to nine.

The oldest, Taj (Fredericks-Malone has been calling him that since she was 14) was the one who "showed us that there was a certain amount of success that could impact your life if you believe that as a person on the face of this Earth you have something to contribute."

Their younger sister, Carole Fredericks, answered that call. In 1979 she moved to Paris, where she learned French and built a reputation as a singer.

"She was able to infuse rhythm and blues, soul and gospel into French music," Fredericks-Malone explains, "and they fell in love with her."

In the 1990s, Carole's soulful, raspy voice won her a string of hit songs, making her an international celebrity. But in 2001, on a humanitarian mission to Africa, Carole died of a heart attack.

During a memorial service for Carole back in Springfield, a stranger tapped Fredericks-Malone on the shoulder, and an epiphany was born. The stranger was a French teacher named Nancy Gadbois. "Nancy told me she had never met my sister but had been using her music in the classroom since the 1990s to teach French," Fredericks-Malone says.

In short order, the two teamed up to produce "Tant Qu'elle Chante, Elle Vit" (As Long as She Sings, She Lives). The study program combines workbook exercises with Fredericks' music videos to teach French.

With the support of her siblings, including Taj, Fredericks-Malone established The Carole D. Fredericks Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to enriching the quality of French language education. Today the collection of study materials is used in more than 1,000 schools and 50 colleges and universities throughout the United States, Canada and as far away as Singapore.

Both the foundation and CDF Music Legacy, which handles the business side of Carole's music, operate out of Fredericks-Malone's office on the bottom floor of Canandaigua's First Congregational Church on Main Street.

A project with such an international and diverse scope might seem unlikely in a small, homogeneous city in western New York. Her eyes dance at the notion.

"It's a traditional type of place, yes ... and there are not many people here of color, but to be honest, that's not my issue. I'm of a mind that I face each day and face each person one at a time. That doesn't mean I don't have black pride — it's just that I've moved beyond that.

"My mom used to say, 'I don't worry about Connie. She'll put out her hand and have you shake it,' and I guess that's true no matter where I am."

Note: *Fredericks-Malone occasionally sings at Irene's Café in Geneva with local musician Michael Yacci. For more information on her foundation, go to www.carolefredericksfoundation.org.*

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Additional Facts

Taj in town

Taj Mahal is one of the headliners of this year's Rochester International Jazz Festival. He is

scheduled to perform at 8 p.m. June 19 in the Eastman Theatre.
Tickets are \$45 to \$75 (plus service charge). For more, go to www.rochesterjazz.com or, for tickets, call Ticketmaster at (800) 745-3000.