

Dr. Daisy Elitha Peterson Sweeney

Daisy Elitha Peterson was born in Montreal, Canada, on May 7, 1920, to Daniel Peterson, a boatswain from the Virgin Islands, and Kathleen Olivia John, a cook and housekeeper from St. Kitts. The second of five children, (Fred, Daisy, Chuck, Oscar and May) she and her family lived in the area of Montreal that came to be known as St Henri.

The family endured the financial hardship of the Depression. The children would scour the streets for scraps of coal, put cardboard in their shoes to cover holes in the soles, and at times, did not have enough food to eat. Tuberculosis hit the family hard, and Daisy was forced to be on bedrest in a sanatorium. Her brother, Fred, died from the disease at the age of 15.

Daniel, who had taught himself music and how to play the piano, bought the family a piano because he believed that music would be a positive alternative for his growing family to the few work opportunities for people of colour –being a railway porter, a redcap, or a domestic. Daisy's father, who worked for the CPR as a porter, and could be away from home for four to six-week stretches, would set out lessons for the children to practise. Daisy was made responsible for teaching her brothers and her sister.

During the years of the Second World War, Daisy worked as a riveter in an airplane factory. She also found employment as a domestic. At the same time, she continued her music training and would eventually study under the classical Hungarian pianist, Paul de Markey. Daisy earned an associate of music degree from McGill University. She also performed for Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) events, and was active in the Union United Church and St. Jude's Anglican Church, where she sang in the choir and would eventually become, at various times, organist for both churches.

She began her teaching practice, privately and at the Negro Community Centre, where she offered hundreds and hundreds of children the fundamentals of music theory, voice and piano. She pushed her students to excel, and entered them into music festivals and competitions. A member of the Quebec Professional Piano Teachers' Federation, she prepared her students for music theory and piano exams given by the McGill Preparatory School of Music. Her students repeatedly won honours of high distinction.

Married to James Robert Sweeney, a cook from Monserrat, she miscarried at five months. She was told that she could not have children. Wanting to raise a family, she fostered Joan at the age of three. She would then give birth to twins Judith and Heather. Heather died of sudden infant death. Daisy became pregnant, once again, with Sylvia.

Learning that Joan had a half-brother, Kenneth, who was in need of a good home, she took him into her brood. Her husband's sons, Essley and Joseph, were also brought into the home. Many years later, she would adopt Tina into the family. Throughout the years, Mrs. Sweeney fostered and sheltered many children, offering lunch or a safe haven after school.

While raising a family, she continued her music training, studying organ with Philip Motley, and piano with Karl Steiner. She also took courses at the Thomas More Institute, and attended a wide range of lectures at various institutions. A creative person, she took evening classes in carpentry, fine arts (painting), and sewing.

In the 1980's, Mrs. Sweeney formed a children's choir at Union United Church. She then invited former student Trevor Payne to conduct the choir. Dr. Payne eventually developed the ensemble into the celebrated Montreal Jubilation Choir.

Other notable students include Oliver Jones and Joe Sealey, Dawn Tyrell, Diane Thornhill, Ken Skinner and, of course, her brother, Oscar Peterson. However, she instilled in all her students a deep appreciation and understanding of music and the piano, even if they chose not to make music a career.

Mrs. Sweeney was awarded an honorary doctorate from Sudbury's Laurentian University. She was featured in the Round Table Black History Month Calendar of 1999. In addition, she is a Martin Luther King Award recipient, offered by the Black Theatre Workshop. In 2005, Dr. Daisy Peterson Sweeney was honoured with a series of gospel concerts as a part of the 250th anniversary of the Lachine Canal, which feted significant women from the area who have made an outstanding contribution to the community and city. Dr. Sweeney was also given a Certificate of Recognition from the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, extending the Government's appreciation for her selfless contribution to the community and Canada.

Mrs. Sweeney, now 85, has suffered a number of strokes over the past few years. Living in a care facility, she sometimes takes the opportunity to play the piano, remembering how much the piano and music have meant to her, personally, to her family, and to the countless students who have been blessed with her training.

Kenneth Hemmerick
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