



MARGIE BOULÉ

At 60, she jazzed up her life; why don't you, she asks

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Don't tell Linda Lee Michelet she's heading into her "declining" years. Or if you do, be prepared for her laughter.

Four years ago Linda was 56 years old. She'd worked as a legal secretary for TriMet for many years. She'd been married, raised two kids, "tended the home fires," as she puts it, and then divorced.

Linda always had had a hankering to be a performer and even had taken dance lessons with her daughter Lindsey when Lindsey was a teenager. They'd performed an occasional mother-daughter act once or twice a year, at local fairs. Once they sang and danced in Japan, at a huge amusement park. But now Lindsey was grown and pursuing her own performing career. It was looking like Linda's time on the edge of the spotlight had ended.



Photo by Owen Carey

Still, Linda had dreams of performing. So she made it happen. Her decision to change her life four years ago led to "a sea change," she says. "It was sort of a feminine mystique epiphany."

Today the mother and former wife and secretary is a licensed private investigator and a successful singer on Portland's jazz circuit. She's been a regular performer at the Heathman Hotel for two years, and she packs the house. She's been featured on a local jazz compilation CD.

Last November Linda turned 60. Even she is amazed at the changes she's made in her life these past four years. Or as she puts it, "It has worked out quite well for this old broad."

She offers this advice for other women inching past middle age: "It's time to become fearless and do things they never thought they could or would, to come into their own."

"I love having men in my life, but I don't need them the way I did before," Linda says. "I'm from that era where my dad told me what to do, my husband told me what to do" and, four years ago, "I was letting a boyfriend tell me what to do."

It was the breakup with the boyfriend that finally got Linda to take a serious look at what she wanted for herself. She needed, she realized, "to break through instead of breaking down."

At work she'd spent years assisting TriMet attorneys dealing with accident cases. So when her boss suggested Linda get a private investigator's license, instead of saying she was too old or tired, Linda studied, took the exam and became a P.I. Today she spends her time investigating accidents for TriMet, doing background checks and testifying in court.

"There are terrible accidents that happen," Linda says. "People literally do fall" in front of buses or MAX trains. "But there are also a lot of people who want money they really don't deserve. We put together the missing pieces of the puzzles."

It's rewarding work. But what really has brought light into Linda's life is the music she makes in the evenings.

Four years ago Linda decided "to put my dream in my own hands and try to become a performer. It was terribly frightening to me. I think it's probably the most frightening thing I've ever done."

Peggy Lee had recently died. Linda grew up listening to Lee's records; she knew the lyrics and stylings of the woman who made the song "Fever" her signature piece. So, Linda took a deep breath and approached Terry Currier, owner of Music Millennium. She'd like to do a live tribute to Peggy Lee in his store, Linda told Terry. "He said, 'That would be great.' "

Linda contacted some of the best musicians in Portland to provide backup. "I didn't even know these people," she says. She paid someone to write charts. She found a seamstress to create a gown.

"I was terrified," she says. "But when I came in the store that night, there were 150 people standing there. I was overwhelmed. It was such a hit, I knew. I said, this is what I have to do."

A few months later Linda performed a tribute to Julie London. That led to a gig at The Heathman; she's been there on the last Saturday of the month ever since. "I've done New Year's Eve there for two years," Linda says. She also recorded her CD, "Linda Lee Michelet Live," at the Heathman.

These days, Linda is an established jazz singer in the city. "Not because I'm all that and a bag of chips," she says. It's because she really puts on a show, she says. "I dress up like Peggy Lee in these fabulous gowns," and she steps from the stage "and I sing to people. You might think that's corny, but people just love it."

She's both gratified and surprised by her own success. "I'm always amazed that I'm on the radio," she says. When her cell phone rang while she was on a city bus recently, and Linda learned one of her songs would be included on a local jazz compilation CD, "I just burst into tears on the bus. I said, 'I have to call you back. I can't even talk.' "

These victories might be taken for granted by a younger performer. But Linda put off her dreams long enough to be amazed and grateful they've finally come true. And she wants other women her age to understand it's not too late to pull those old dreams from the shelf and try them on.

"Turning 60 isn't a stop on the road to oblivion like it used to be," Linda says. "For an increasing number of women, it's a time to become fearless and do things they never thought they could or would, to come into their own."

When Linda slips into one of her slinky performance gowns, when she pulls up her long satin gloves, when she reaches for the microphone, she's delighted "that I have chosen steamy over stodgy for my 'declining years.' "

She's still picking up steam: Linda's performance schedule is booked for the rest of 2007.

"It's scary at times, and absolutely exhilarating at others, but it's been worth every dollar bill and drop of sweat," Linda says. She's convinced if she can do it, other women can. "Pedal to the metal, ladies."

Linda Lee Michelet, P.I., will perform with a big band at The Old Church, from 4 to 6 p.m. March 18.

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