

# Pierre-Louis, Joni Mae (1927–2009)

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Joni Mae Pierre-Louis served Oakwood College/University from the time she entered as a student and through more than a decade as a member of the music faculty. After her college years she married an Adventist educator, and his calls to service resulted in her also serving the SDA church at Pacific Union College in California. Later she returned to Oakwood and served faithfully in music ministry at the College church.

Joni Mae was born on December 20, 1927, in Watertown, Tennessee, a small town east of

Nashville. She was the second child born to John Robinson and Ann Hill Robinson, with an older sister, Willa, and two brothers, Cleophas (C.H.) and Myron.<sup>1</sup> When she was still a small child, her parents joined the Great Migration and moved the family to Cleveland, Ohio, where Joni Mae attended elementary and high school. At Central High School she quickly became a popular soloist and also sang with an elite group, the A Capella Chorale. Through the ministry of a colporteur (literature evangelist) who sold Ann Robinson some books and gave her Bible studies, the Robinson family became Seventh-day Adventists while Joni Mae was in high school.<sup>2</sup>

After high school Joni Mae declined several music scholarship offers and enrolled at Oakwood in 1946.<sup>3</sup> She joined the College Choir and was immediately selected for Eva B. Dykes's newly conceived *Aeolians* ensemble. She was one of its soloists as the choir/Aeolians made its mark on the campus and surrounding areas with many divine service and concert presentations.<sup>4</sup> She also served as one of the two female vocalists who accompanied the Male Chorus on their public relations tours for the college and as a member of a female trio that also served the same purpose.<sup>5</sup> Oakwood had just become a senior college but its music program was not yet a full-fledged B.A. program, and at the advice of President F. L. Peterson, in 1948 Pierre-Louis transferred to Andrews



Joni Mae Pierre-Louis

Photo courtesy of Oakwood University Archives.

University (then Emmanuel Missionary College) to complete a bachelor's degree in music and French.<sup>5</sup> After graduating in 1950, she returned to Oakwood, where she directed the Academy Choir and taught French.<sup>7</sup>

In 1952 Joni Mae married her Oakwood sweetheart, Sam Pierre-Louis, and traveled with him to Haiti to fulfill his obligation to return to the Adventist school there after completing coursework in America.<sup>8</sup> A health problem during her first pregnancy led her to return to home base in Cleveland for the birth of her first child, Philip (1953–2016).<sup>9</sup> The Pierre-Louis family returned to Oakwood in 1954. Their three other children—Colleen, Desmond, and Janine—were born during the Oakwood years while their parents were on the college faculty. Reflecting on the Aeolians while he served as president (1954–1963), Garland J. Millet penned: “Mrs. Joni Pierre-Louis, a member and soloist of the first Aeolians, was the second director. A special memory involved her rich soprano solos rendered just before the president’s periodic sermons at the College church. . . . Mrs. Pierre-Louis was the singer of choice.”<sup>10</sup> On at least one concert tour, President Millet accompanied the Aeolians, making the verbal appeals for support for the university and basking in the accolades received by the choir.<sup>11</sup>

As time permitted, starting immediately after college Mrs. Pierre-Louis took graduate classes in music—at Northwestern University and Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland—and finished a master’s degree in music at Andrews University in 1964, with emphasis in choral conducting and voice.<sup>12</sup> She began full-time teaching in the Oakwood College Music Department in 1954, and was appointed to direct the College Choir in 1956. Immediately she started reaching out to pastors and church organizations in many states, believing that “travel is always a great incentive in getting students to join and remain in a choral group.”<sup>13</sup> Soon the choir was receiving invitations from various churches, and it obliged. But it was too large for one transportation vehicle, and Pierre-Louis, with fond, appreciative memories of her student days at Oakwood, decided that there should be a “rebirth” of a touring group from among the choir members that could supplement the public relations activities of Calvin Moseley’s Male Chorus.<sup>14</sup> For a few years following the Dykes era, the Aeolians had been dormant. Pierre-Louis revived and upgraded. As a student she had been one of a carefully selected group of 16 Aeolians, but she created a group of forty, just enough to be accommodated in one vehicle for promotional touring. She continued directing both choir and Aeolians, and under her directorship the Aeolians broke several boundaries.<sup>15</sup>

The group did tours covering many churches and colleges in the west (Texas, Arizona, and California), north (Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan), and east (New York, Washington, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts).<sup>16</sup> Closer to home they sang in several cities like Atlanta, New Orleans, and Mobile, and performed to full-capacity audiences at Southern Missionary College (now Southern Adventist University), receiving a cordial welcome at the institution where there would not be the first black faculty member until 10 years later. For both colleges this visit was a bridge-building enterprise.<sup>17</sup> On their western tour they also presented a concert at the Long Beach Convention Center for the Pacific Union Youth Congress.<sup>18</sup> On one tour they raised enough money for their robes.<sup>19</sup> They sang at the 1965 World Fair in New York, were featured on NBC TV, and one Huntsville TV station recorded tapes of performances for re-broadcast during one Christmas season.<sup>20</sup>

In 1965 the Pierre-Louis family moved to Cleveland where Sam Pierre-Louis completed classes for a doctoral degree at Case Western Reserve University. While there, Mrs. Pierre-Louis directed the choral music program at Glenville High School and its choir that was reputedly the best choir in the state of Ohio at that time.<sup>21</sup> She also directed the Senior Choir at Glenville SDA Church and performed as a soloist throughout the area.<sup>22</sup> After his studies Sam Pierre-Louis accepted a position at Pacific Union College in California. Mrs. Pierre-Louis became an adjunct instructor at PUC and held a full-time position in the public school system in Oakland. She directed choirs at the junior and high school levels and was appointed director of the *Castleers*, the popular Castlemont High School Choir. She also served at Lynwood SDA Academy in Los Angeles while her former Oakwood student Bill Wright was principal there.<sup>23</sup>

After retiring, Pierre-Louis returned to Huntsville and Oakwood's vibrant music life. At the College church she started the Young Adult Chorale and planned many musical programs.<sup>24</sup> Her active involvement in music became therapy after the death of her husband in 1986, and she remained in Huntsville until failing health demanded closer proximity to family. She lived the last five years of her life in California, mostly with her daughter Colleen, before passing on May 10, 2009.<sup>25</sup>

Pierre-Louis will be remembered for creating a promotional program that brought nationwide fame to the Oakwood Aeolians.

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## SOURCES

"Joni M. Pierre-Louis obituary." Oakwood University church, June 27, 2009.

Malcolm, Roy E., ed. *The Aeolians: Directors Recall Precious Memories*. Huntsville, Alabama: Oakwood College Publishing Association, 1999.

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## NOTES

1. "Joni M. Pierre-Louis obituary," Oakwood University church, June 27, 2009.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid. See also Roy E. Malcolm, ed., *The Aeolians: Directors Recall Precious Memories* (Huntsville, Alabama: Oakwood College Publishing Association, 1999), 13.
5. Malcolm.

6. Ibid.
7. "Joni M. Pierre-Louis obituary."
8. Ibid. See also Malcolm.
9. Colleen Pierre-Louis, interviewed by author, Huntsville, Alabama, May 19, 2019. See also "Joni M. Pierre-Louis obituary."
10. Malcolm, iv.
11. Ibid., 19.
12. Ibid., 13.
13. Ibid., 15.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 15–21.
16. Ibid., 19, 20.
17. Ibid., 15.
18. Ibid., 19.
19. Ibid., 21.
20. Ibid., 20, 21.
21. "Joni M. Pierre-Louis obituary."
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.

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