

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY



By Larry Katz

First, the house called out. The onetime headquarters of the National Negro Opera Company, the Queen Anne-style house in Pittsburgh desperately needed restoration, so much so that the National Trust for Historic Preservation had named it one of America's 11 most endangered historic places.

Boston designer Dawn Carroll wanted to aid the preservation effort. But as she learned more about the house once known as *Mystery Manor*, Mary Cardwell Dawson, the woman behind the National Negro Opera Company, also called out to her.

Dawson was an unsung Black cultural hero whose name and work needed restoration, too. What started out for Carroll as a THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY fund-raising effort grew into a musical passion project, 'Songs for Mary'.

In addition to her work as a designer and songwriter, Carroll is also dedicated to encouraging mentoring through the Over My Shoulder Foundation, a non-profit she co-founded with Grammy award-winning singer Patti Austin. That was what brought them to the site of a different restoration project in early 2020, two short months before the coronavirus arrived in the U.S.

Can you tell me how you came to learn about the dilapidated state of the home of the National Negro Opera Company in the first place?

"Every January we try to do something to celebrate National Mentoring Month. We partnered up with the Cabot Theater (in Beverly, Massachusetts) because it was their 100th anniversary party and they were doing a fund raiser to complete the

restoration of their gorgeous theater. Patti and I learned that there are only a couple of hundred of these antique gems left. We signed up to do a concert to try to help them raise money.”

“This was right before the pandemic hit. And we learned that part of the reason these old theaters from the 1920s were so ornate, so glitzy and glamorous was to psychologically pull people out of the sadness and depression of the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic. These theaters were designed to improve the mental health of everyone, to give them hope and inspiration and surround them with beauty and fantasy so that they could recover from the pandemic. That was really interesting to us and it became much more interesting once we were all in lock down that March.”

“We started to explore these endangered theaters. We wanted to create a music mentoring and design tour for Patti where she would do shows at these glorious theaters to try to help preserve them. And then COVID happened. We were all stuck in our houses and we had extra time on our hands. So I started researching and that’s how I stumbled upon the Mary Dawson story.”

What drew you to Mary Cardwell Dawson’s story?

“I feel like the spirit of Mary Dawson kind of got into my soul. At the risk of sounding like some crazy person who believes in ghosts and spirits, something almost magical happened. I typed in ‘historic theaters’ and did a Google search. The National Negro Opera house in Pittsburgh bounced onto my screen. It was not only threatened but severely endangered. What I found was a story lost in history. Even Patti, whose family’s from Pittsburgh, was like, ‘What is this place?’ This was a house where prominent musicians, sports figures, an eclectic collection of high-profile people of color would go to socialize and just be safe.

“I went bananas when I found out about it. Initially, all I wanted to do was try to raise the money to save the house. My first idea was to do a television show about restoring this property. I spent months researching the project. And I found it was more

than a historically significant property, it was the National Negro Opera Company. It blossomed into the story of this female warrior named Mary Dawson, this outspoken, intelligent woman who changed the course of women’s history.

“Mary Dawson had a dream. She wanted to be an opera singer but there was no opportunity for a woman of color to pursue that dream. So she said, ‘Okay, I got to find my own way’. She went to Boston and studied at the New England Conservatory and came out with dual degrees (in voice and piano). She knew she wasn’t going to get to sing for a White opera company so she started her own. She was the talent agent and contract negotiator and the international business person procuring European talent to perform in her shows. This lady was insanely resourceful and creative. She fought for equal rights in the 1940s, She fought for musicians and went toe-to-toe with unions. She managed to stay married while being an entrepreneur who started her own music school (in 1927) as well as her own opera company (in 1941). She was this woman who found different routes to accomplish whatever dream she was after. She just became my hero. Now, for almost a year, Mary Dawson has consumed my life.”

There are other people working to save the house and to honor Mary’s life and legacy. Were you in contact with them?

“Yes. I stumbled around and found that there were people in Pittsburgh who were trying to save Mary’s house. It wasn’t easy to get in touch with the owner of the property. I had to work hard to find her. And then I found out that Denyce Graves, the amazing opera singer, was doing an opera about Mary Dawson (‘The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson’ which had its premiere in 2021 at the Glimmerglass Festival in New York). So I reached out to her in my naive way. ‘Hi, Denise. You don’t know me. My name’s Dawn and we have a mutual affection for Mary Dawson. Can we talk?’ She wrote me back immediately and we had a conference call last July, to talk about different ideas.”



The Mary Caldwell Dawson House in 2021 and 1950

Contact: Dawn Carroll 617-510-2620 SongsForMary.com

Were you already thinking about doing your own musical piece about Mary?

"Well, at that time they needed \$80,000 to shore up the property so that the snow and wind wouldn't knock it down over the winter. I started thinking about doing a show on HGTV or one of those channels where prominent people with a passion for design like Lenny Kravitz and Brad Pitt and Patti Austin, who always wants to be a designer, would get together and save this property and other ones too. I already had my eye on the next one, which was Nina Simone's home in North Carolina, which was also falling apart. I felt like I needed a piece of music as a marketing piece to really have a professional package so that someone like a Lenny Kravitz would pay attention to me. So that was how we created the first song, which was called "If the Walls Could Talk"."

You say 'we': Who else were you collaborating with?

"I can't do a single solitary thing without (rock veteran) Jon Butcher. He is my rock. He's the most brilliant storyteller, producer, director, guitarist."

"But "If the Walls Could Talk" started out as a poem that I wrote and sent to Michael Berry, a young man who lives in Houston. He's one of our Over My Shoulder darlings who I've known for 10 years, since he was in high school. I sent him links to stories about Mary Dawson and the National Negro Opera house. He sent me back a spoken-word piece, a rap that was brilliant, more than I could ever have imagined. We decided to fly him up to Boston and record it with music."

"Michael managed to take my poem and make it his own message. What he did was just so inspiring. When we got the final mix together, Jon Butcher and I looked at each other and said, 'Wow, this is really really good. What else do we do with it?' And that's the moment when this went from a TV design-type show idea and started moving into all these other stories."

"More songs started coming. All these people who stayed in Mary Dawson's house-Roberto Clemente, Lena Horne, Count Basie, Cab Calloway, the boxer Joe Louis-started raising their hands saying, 'Say something about me! Write about me!' I mean I'd

never heard of Joe Louis before, but his story was so incredible and it's still so relevant. He was a world champion boxer and one of his fights in Germany was promoted as America fighting against the Nazis and here we are today with Nazis in the conversation again. You had Lena Horne, who marched with Martin Luther King. I became obsessed with wondering what they would say if they opened their eyes today. What would they say to us at this moment in time? What if the walls could talk? They had worked so hard and risked so much and sacrificed so much and here we are again. That started a conversation about turning this into a show."

So what's the concept for the show?

"It really was inspired by Michael Berry, who's a young man who wants to change the world. The show begins with a young rapper who discovers that the National Negro Opera house is on the brink of extinction. He finds Mary Dawson's house crumbling, along with her dreams of equality, artistic freedom and human rights. But the walls begin to talk with the voices of these prominent Black Americans, who are stunned that after all they fought for we remain a cruel and racist world."

Wow! When do you think we will get to "If the Walls Could Talk"

"Right now we have 15 songs recorded. We're completing the mixing and mastering and hopefully the show will take place. I am super excited to get it written and watch it come to life so we decided to go ahead and release the music first as a soundtrack called 'Songs for Mary' and that will help introduce Mary Dawson's amazing story to people who don't know it. We still have to write more for the show, but we want to get this out now because we've invested so much time and energy in this. We want the story out there. We want Mary to mentor once again and help stop the hate, cure the anger, get rid of the jealousy. We want to preserve the home and preserve others so we can stop gutting the earth and destroying the planet. I think the world needs an ale fashion "whooping"from Mary Dawson, I think the world need heroes right now. Mary passed away 60 years ago, but she and her friends still are fantastic mentors!"