

Thursday, August 14, 1980

(F10)

Margaret Whiting talks about '4 Girls'

By JIM WINDELL

It's late Monday night and she just flew in from Kansas City where it was 110 degrees and the hotel air conditioning was broken. Margaret Whiting is going on very little sleep but she's wrapping gifts.

The gifts give the feeling of Christmas, and with the first night of the Democratic National Convention on TV in the background, there's an air of excitement.

The gifts are a tradition among Ms. Whiting and her three buddies. Except that one of her pals, Rose Marie, has a birthday coming up Friday and there is a special gift for her, besides the others. The gifts indicate the relationship between the four girls.

"It was Helen O'Connell's idea," Ms. Whiting says, as she wraps a scarf in bright red paper with white polka dots. "Let's, each time we open, give each other a gift," she said. So we do that. When we open our tour for the year, we get roses, but after that no one gives you anything."

Each time they open a week's run in a new city they give each other small and sometimes unusual gifts.

THE GIFTS SUGGEST the special feeling among four singers, Ms. Whiting and Ms. Marie and Rosemary Clooney and Helen O'Connell, who for some three years have toured with a show called "4 Girls 4." Making their fourth appearance in the Detroit area since 1977, they opened a six-day run Tuesday at the Star Theatre of Flint.

After arriving from Kansas City by plane Monday morning, Ms. Whiting went to her sister's home in Birmingham. Barbara Whiting Smith, Margaret's only sister, was a singer and actress at one time herself. In the 1950s, Barbara and Margaret had a TV show for two seasons called "The Whiting Girls."

Margaret and Barbara have a close relationship, also, as is clear from their conversation. Each has one child and

Margaret is proud of her nephew, Richard, a student at U-M who plans to become a nuclear physicist.

There is constant playful banter between the two sisters, and while the interview is going on Barbara gives running accounts of the Democratic convention.

The convention telecast is from New York, Margaret Whiting's home (she was born in Detroit and grew up in Hollywood), and she is incensed about an article she read the day before in a Kansas City newspaper derogatory of her city.

"I love cities and I love to see their rebirth. Like in Detroit. I love to see new theaters and old ones refurbished. I'd like to see us all get our thing together and clean up all the cities, not just for a convention, but for the rest of us."

THE CONVENTION spurred other talk of things important to Ms. Whiting, a woman of strong feelings and convictions. "Where are all the young men who could lead this country?" she asks.

She then moves on to something more personal. "Traveling makes me aware of what goes on in many communities. I wanted to look at my own priorities and try to do something important for my country. I think people should stand up and be counted. We're in bad times in this country."

What could she do to make a difference?

"I don't know. I really don't. Maybe if I talk to more people, they will talk to more... maybe just make people think."

Ms. Whiting talks about her special friendships with her three "buddies" as she wraps a tape recorder. Her big blue eyes convey the warm feelings for them.

"I'm thrilled with the happiness it brings to people. There is something very magical about the four of us. If the other girls were here now they would say, 'Here it comes. This is where she says we were booked by

God.' Well, it seems true."

Ms. Whiting had a long and successful career as a singer and recording star long before "4 Girls 4" was conceived. As a high school student in the '40s she appeared on radio with Johnny Mercer and soon afterward had her first hit record, "That Old Black Magic."

Other big records followed: "My Ideal," "Moonlight in Vermont," "It Might as Well Be Spring" and "What are You Doing New Year's Eve."

SINCE BEING together and performing 25 to 30 weeks a year in "4 Girls 4," the careers of all four have been booming. Each has many separate business ventures, but together they have two TV specials coming on the Public Broadcasting System.

Ms. Whiting's latest album, on Audiodisc, is a tribute to Johnny Mercer and her own famous song-writing father, Richard Whiting. Entitled "Too Marvelous for Words," it features her in a trio setting doing songs like "Blues in the Night" and "She's Funny That Way," as well as a new recording of "My Ideal." She is obviously happy about being called a jazz singer by some critics as a result of this record.

On the current tour of "4 Girls 4," there are new clothes and songs for all four women. "We have to keep it fresh," Ms. Whiting said. Instead of doing her World War II medley, as she has done in past years, she now includes what she calls an "ooh and aah" medley.

"These are the songs people will like. It starts with 'As Time Goes By' and includes 'Moonlight in Vermont,' 'On the Good Ship Lollipop' and things like that. I bring it all the way up to today and do a disco number."

In addition, she points out, Rosemary Clooney and Helen O'Connell have added Melissa Manchester songs and Rose Marie, noted for her comedy routines, has a new and "better" Jimmy Durante act.



"4 Girls 4" are (clockwise, from left) Rosemary Clooney, Rose Marie, Helen O'Connell and Margaret Whiting.

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