

How to try out for the Opry

By Iris Sanderson Jones
special writer

If you want to dream the not-so-impossible dream, go to the annual Opryland auditions from noon to 3 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 17, at the Music Hall Center, 350 Madison Avenue, Detroit.

The audition is open call, which means that appointments are not taken and that everyone who arrives will get an audition. If the idea gives you butterflies, listen to Jenny Roberts Wilcox of Farmington Hills, who was hired the first time she auditioned for Opryland.

"If you have a desire to be in show business, do it! I know too many people who wanted it but did something else instead. Start small. Sing wherever and whenever you can — in the choir, at school, at church, anywhere.

"Do every audition you can get. Even if you don't get the part, it's not failure, it's experience. Different companies are looking for different things.

Opryland looks for a particular type, young Americans who are wholesome and versatile, willing to work and able to get along with other people. Talent helps, experience helps, but they are not looking for experience as much as for people who can work with the public."

JENNY'S TIPS for the audition:

"Catch their attention. Sparkle. Be yourself. It is not a question of being pretty, but the best you can be. Personality.

"Pick songs that aren't done every day, one upbeat and one ballad. You usually don't have the chance to sing the whole thing, so pick highlights that showcase your style.

"In dance, it's not so much technique as whether you can 'sell' the dance and have a good time.

"Most important: People get turned down at every audition. Don't take it personally. I was lucky and got hired the first time, but usually you must audition four or five times before you make it."

Opryland talent scouts hold auditions in 30 cities across the country every year. About 8,000 people audition, about 350 are hired.

Bob Whittaker, director of the Opryland Entertainment Department, says, "We hire some of the best young performers in the nation."

ALUMNI of Opryland include Cynthia Rhodes, who appeared in "Flashdance," co-starred with John Travolta in "Staying Alive," and starred with Tom Selleck in "Hawaii Five-O"; Cynthia Leake, who played in "The Bear"; Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio of "Scarface"; Denise DiNoia, who did "Cats" and "A Chorus Line" on Broadway and soap opera star Perry Stephens.

The audition team seeks performers for a variety of productions at Opryland USA, including the musical productions, the General Jackson Showboat and extravaganzas in the 1,600-seat Acuff Theater.

Three large-cast Opryland shows help performers learn production skills: "I Hear America Singing Its Songs," which spotlights American popular songs from Stephen Foster and John Philip Sousa to Irving Berlin and Duke Ellington; "For Me and My Gal," a lighthearted revue of American music from 1890 to World War I; and "Country Music USA," featuring the songs that put Nashville on the map.

Smaller casts are used for "Sing the Glory Down," a gospel show; "Country and Bluegrass Show," "The Tennessee River Boys," which features contemporary country music; and "At the Hop," a 1950s rock'n'roll revue.

For more information, call the Opryland Entertainment Department at (615) 871-6656.



Garth Wingfield (left) of Houston, Jenny Wilcox of Farmington Hills, Suzanne Dewey of Nashville and Brad Fox of Anderson, Ind., entertain aboard the General Jackson Showboat.

ertain aboard the General Jackson Showboat.

Showboat's big wheels keep turnin'

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mother, Verna, was teaching piano and singing in the Farmington Musicale when Jenny sang her first solo in the fifth grade. Verna Roberts sings now with the Detroit Madrigal Singers of Southfield. Jenny's father, dentist Dr. James N. Roberts, still sings in the Farmington Community Chorus, as he did when Jenny auditioned for the choir at O.E. Duncel Junior High School and for the Northern Lights at North Farmington High.

By the time she got to Calvin College in Grand Rapids and then entered Wayne State University as a music and theater major, she had already won top rating in the state solo competitions, sung in the state honors choir and toured Europe for five weeks with Musical Youth International.

THERE WERE several moments that changed her life on the way to singing and dancing down the Cumberland River in Nashville. One was the day in 1981 when she auditioned at Marygrove College for a summer job at Opryland USA.

To her amazement, they said yes the first time around.

"They hired me as a singer," Jenny said. "I had done some professional singing and dancing at the Cooper's Arms in Rochester and at the theater in Henry Ford Museum, and there I was doing lots of different parts in a show called 'I Hear America Singing'."

"I went back the next summer to do 'Country Music USA' and had a chance to sing on the cast album."

That's when another of these life-time turning points occurred. "I got sick of the business of the competition and the pressure I knew that I no longer had my sights on Broadway. I went home in 1983 to change my focus and never really expected to come back. I got my equity card and went to work at Meadowbrook Music Theater."

WHAT JENNY really wanted to do, what she still likes to do, is sing Christian music. "I want to use my skills the way God wants me to use them, not just as entertainment but for a purpose."

She eventually realized that she wasn't doing that in the Detroit area

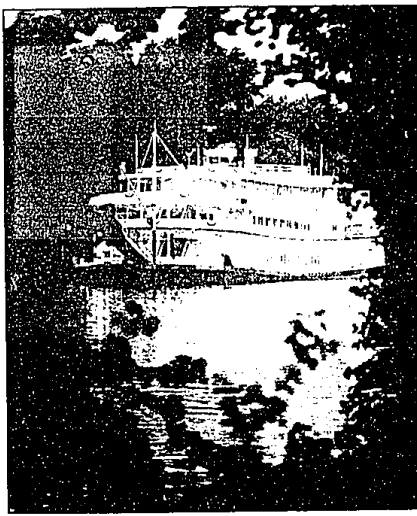
either, so she headed back for Nashville to find her way into the Christian music scene. That turned out to be just as competitive and scheming as any other part of the entertainment business, she said, so Jenny found herself back at Opryland USA.

New doors opened. For three years she worked in the training department, teaching Opryland employees how to work with the public.

"My entertainment experience didn't hurt me there," she met and married another singer, Ken Wilcox. This year she decided that her voice was not being used to full advantage, so she went back on the stage.

"It's only one big show a day instead of the four you do in the theme park, and even now new doors are opening. Ken and I sing in church whenever we're asked. And we have just started as drama directors at Brentwood High School, directing both drama and musicals."

Jenny thinks that she now has exactly what she wants. Everything Family Music, Performance, Teaching. And time to walk through any doors that happen to open as she is singing and dancing her way through life.



The General Jackson Showboat regularly rolls along the river near Nashville, Tenn.

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