

Operation Rising Star lifts Dodson's gospel to new heights

By Tim Hipps, FMWRC Public Affairs

PASADENA, Calif. – Operation Rising Star lifted Army Family member Joyce Dodson's singing career to new heights during a whirlwind week in Southern California.

Dodson celebrated her victory in the Army Family, Morale, Welfare and Recreation Command-sponsored singing contest Feb. 5-12 by recording a three-song, gospel CD at DMI Studios in Old Pasadena, attending the 51st Grammy Awards at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, and singing in a Black History Month concert at a church in Santa Barbara.

The recording session was the grand prize, the Grammys a pleasant surprise, and the church gig a tune-up for her "gone-Hollywood" experience.

Dodson, 25, a gospel singer from Danville, Va., knew she would be cutting a demo CD in California, but was surprised by the perks added to her prize package and the professionalism that awaited her at Firehouse Recording Studios.

"I did know there was a grand prize three-song demo being done in Los Angeles, but I had no idea all the work that goes into that," Dodson said. "I never knew how much work goes into each song on each CD. A lot of work and a lot of love went into this demo, most definitely."

Dodson said she felt blessed to work with some of the best in the recording business.

"I must truly say that every single person I worked with here is truly a professional and an expert in their gift and craft," Dodson said. "The musicians, my vocal coach, the engineers and technicians all worked very hard and long. They put their heart and soul into everything they do – just awesome, awesome professionals."

DMI Music's engineers and producers have recorded artists like Patti Labelle, Chaka Khan, Patti Austin and Foreplay. Aretha Franklin recently recorded a Christmas album there. When Dodson arrived on Monday morning, staffers were still glowing in the aftermath of client Natalie Cole's Grammy victory on Sunday.

"They gave me the best of the best," said Dodson, whose drummer, Burleigh Drummond, played for Ambrosia of "Holdin' On" fame. "There's no second-hand going on here."

Dodson stepped to the microphone and performed like she was right at home with the best of the rest.

"I just tried to listen to everything they told me," she said. "If you can't listen, you can't grow. So I tried to listen to what they told me, tried to do it, and got better and better. Singing is my passion. That's what I love, so that part was easy."

The Grammys – originally called the Gramophone Awards – are presented annually by the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences of the United States for outstanding achievements in the music industry. U.S. Army Soldier Show director Victor Hurtado, a voting member of the association and co-host of the televised Operation Rising Star production, made arrangements for Dodson to attend the awards ceremony that featured performances by prominent artists.

"We went to the Grammys and the official after-party at the convention center," said Dodson, who was accompanied by husband Sgt. Marquis Dodson. "I had a good time but I had to leave early because I had to prepare to come to the studio this morning."

"We got there early because we wanted to get a good seat, and the stars came in late. I got to see Blair Underwood. I had the opportunity to talk with him, but I didn't. I didn't want to go star-struck on him.

"We also saw Paula Abdul and Robin Thicke. It was like a big, live concert. My favorite was Stevie Wonder and the Johannas Brothers."

The next day, Dodson became one of the Firehouse Studio staff's favorite first-time recording artists.

"She doesn't need any help," said vocals coach/producer Terry Wood, a studio background singer. "She's got a beautifully developed sense of herself and her instrument is gorgeous. She's got a great feel. She has no



Operation Rising Star winner Joyce Dodson sings "Faith and Hope" at DMI Music's Firehouse Recording Studios in Pasadena, where she recorded a three-song CD as part of her prize package for winning the Army Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation Command-sponsored singing contest. Photo by Tim Hipps, FMWRC Public Affairs



Operation Rising Star winner Joyce Dodson sings "Faith and Hope," written by U.S. Army Soldier Show director Victor Hurtado and David Ylvisakir, as part of the Steven Roberts Learn to Sing Gospel Workshop and Concert Feb. 7 at the First Presbyterian Church in Pasadena, Calif. Photo by Tim Hipps, FMWRC Public Affairs

pitch problems that I can hear of at all."

The long day began with Dodson and four musicians laying down the music, making sure it was on point and ready for more vocal tracks.

"I sang along with the live band just to give them a real feel of what I'm singing so they can feel it better by hearing me and how I sing it – nothing fancy, just something for them to go by," she said.

That process consumed most of the morning. By midday, they were mixing more instrumental riffs, followed by more mixing. By nightfall, the group moved onto background vocals, which Wood and Hurtado sang into the wee hours of Tuesday morning – long after Dodson had retreated to the hotel.

"Jet lag is kicking my butt," Dodson said after completing a 12-hour day in the studio. "Today I did a lot better than Saturday, but it's still a nine-hour difference between here and Germany."

Dodson returned to the studio on Tuesday to sing lead vocals.

"She was so inspiring, that the vocal coach asked to sing with us on the background vocals," Hurtado said with a proud smile.

Wood was amazed with Dodson's poise as a novice in the recording studio.

"You don't sound the same to yourself in the headphones," Wood explained. "It can be scary because you can hear flaws and pitch and things that you don't hear live because you feel it more than you hear it, but that was not the case with her at all. In fact, I treated her like a session singer doing the backgrounds. I never even considered her not being a studio singer. I talked to her just like I would talk to one of my peers in trying to accomplish something. I never pulled any punches with her.

"I think she just might have a future."

Engineer Les Cooper, who mixed Dodson's vocals with the music, agreed.

"Absolutely wonderful," he assessed. "You see a little shyness out of her, but once she started singing the leads, she was absolutely wonderful. As long as she knew where she was in the song – because the songs were rearranged and it was a little difficult for her in the beginning – but once she got the hang of it, man, I'll tell you, that girl can sing. She doesn't need much help."

Ditto from pianist Tim Heintz, who produced and arranged Dodson's CD.

"She's just got such a natural gift," he said. "She's got chops. She can bring it. And she's so eager – with eyes wide open. She was a dream to work with because the studio can be very intimidating, but she didn't seem fazed by it at all.

"She hopped right in, opened her mouth, and a great voice came out."

Hurtado and David Ylvisakir wrote "Faith and Hope" especially for Dodson.

"He told me that I inspired him to write that song," Dodson said. "It reminded me of when I was in the finals of Operation Rising Star competition. I remember Victor asked me, 'What drives you?' And I said, 'My faith drives me. That's what pushes me and keeps me going.'"

"New Beginnings," Dodson's favorite of the three songs, was written by Army veteran Linda Dummars, who participated in the Army Festival of the Performing Arts under the direction of Joe Leavell, FMWRC's new talent coordinator.

"That song has so much feeling and so much passion you can tell that it was written from a sincere heart with a true love for God," Dodson said. "I really love that song. To me, it just really describes what's going on in my life – this is a new beginning."

Dodson's rendition of the song brought tears to Carpenter's eyes while he mixed the music and vocals.

Dodson's third song, "Stand by Me," was written by Grammy Award-winning gospel composer Steven Roberts.

"I just love that song because I got a chance to meet Mr. Roberts at the concert on Saturday and he is an awesome man of God," Dodson said. "The song is traditional, yet modernized. That song helped me be more diverse so I have material for the young people, yet I can still reel in the more traditional-sounding music, as well. I have fun singing that song. It reminds me of back home at church."

Hurtado, too, was visibly proud of Dodson's poise in the studio.

"When you consider that between the Operation Rising Star video auditions and the show we only saw Joyce sing for a total of 5 ½ minutes, you realize how fortunate we were to end up with Joyce," he said. "You could tell that Joyce had been a Soldier. Even though she was the artist, she completely gave herself to the direction of the producers and vocal coaches."



Operation Rising Star winner Joyce Dodson listens to herself Feb. 9 during a recording session at DMI Music's Firehouse Recording Studios in Pasadena, Calif., where she cut a three-song CD as part of her grand prize for winning the Army Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation Command-sponsored event. Photo by Tim Hipps, FMWRC Public Affairs

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Mari Martin, who has performed with Tower of Power, Average White Band, WAR and the Moody Blues, applauds U.S. Army Soldier Show Director and Operation Rising Star television production host Victor Hurtado and Operation Rising Star winner Joyce Dodson after singing "Lord Prepare Me" at a Steven Roberts Learn to Sing Gospel Music Black History Month Concert at the First Presbyterian Church in Santa Barbara, Calif. Photo by Tim Hipps, FMWRC Public Affairs



Operation Rising Star winner Joyce Dodson, of Bamberg, Germany, takes a break with her husband, Sgt. Marquis Dodson of the 240th Quartermaster Company, during a recording session Feb. 9 at DMI Music's Firehouse Recording Studios in Pasadena, Calif. Joyce, who served four years in the Army now works in Human Resources at the in- and out-processing center at Schweinfurt, Germany. The recording gig was part of her grand prize for winning the singing contest sponsored by the Army Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation Command. Photo by Tim Hipps, FMWRC Public Affairs

Dodson performed alongside the Steven Roberts' Learn to Sing Gospel Music Workshop Choir in a Black History Month Concert at the First Presbyterian Church in Santa Barbara two days before entering the studio.

"It was a workshop, so they had only been working on those songs for two days," Dodson said. "But Mr. Roberts had that choir sounding awesome. It was like everyone coming together for a common cause. I truly enjoyed myself."

Dodson sang "Faith and Hope" solo before being joined by Hurtado and the choir for an "up-tempo, modernized version" of "Lord Prepare Me."

"We had so much fun with that song," Dodson said. "I really did. I think it helped loosen me up a little bit to do the concert before [heading to the studio]. It was like, 'OK, you can do this' in a different atmosphere around different people."

"Take me back to the church so I can get ready to do what I do."

Dodson, a four-year Army veteran who deployed to Iraq, works at the in- and out-processing center in Schweinfurt, Germany, as a Department of the Army civilian.

Hurtado hopes her journey will inspire more Soldiers and Family members to compete to become the Army's next singing star.

"Joyce Dodson has the potential of being a force to reckon within the gospel genre," he said. "The work she did here will do more than validate her as an artist – it validated the work done by the folks at Operation Rising Star."

