

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Announcer: The tenth of fifteen children, Leona Mitchell began her musical journey by singing in her father's church choir. She received a scholarship from Oklahoma City University in 1971, earning a bachelor's degree in music.

Leona debuted with the San Francisco Spring Opera Theater in 1972, and on December 15th, 1975, she made her Metropolitan Opera debut as Micaela in Bizet's Carmen, the same role she had sung at her San Francisco debut. This marked the beginning of her many performances in opera houses all over the world, including Geneva, Paris, Madrid, and Sydney.

Mitchell performed for eighteen consecutive seasons at the Metropolitan.

Well-known for her performances in operas by Puccini and Verdi, she also sang Bess with the Cleveland Orchestra in the London Records recording of the George Gershwin classic Porgy and Bess.

Mitchell has received numerous awards, including induction into the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame in 2001 and the Oklahoma Hall of Fame in 2004.

In Leona's oral history interview, you will hear her talk about a special teacher in her life, and about singing with Placido Domingo and Luciano Pavarotti on the oral history website and podcast VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 8:52

Musical Mitchell's

John Erling (JE): My name is John Erling, and today's date is February 29th, 2024. Leona, what is your full name, please?

Leona Mitchell (LM): My name is Leona Mitchell, and my married name is Bush.

JE: Did you have a middle name?

LM: Pearl. That's named after my mother.

JE: Okay.

LM: Leona Pearl Mitchell Bush.

JE: We're recording this here in Tulsa in the facilities of VoicesOfOklahoma.com. Now, I have actually met you once before.

LM: Mm-hmm. Where would this have been?

JE: Where would this have been? Right. Our mutual friend, Robert Henry.

LM: Oh, Judge Robert Henry.

JE: Former Attorney General of our state, Federal Appeals Court Judge.

LM: Yes.

JE: At symposium that he had in Quartz Mountain.

LM: Oh, yes, yes.

JE: And you sang there.

LM: Mm-hmm.

JE: I was so moved by your singing, I had to come up and greet you.

LM: Okay.

JE: But I said, you have a gift from God. And I can still... I can still remember how appreciative you were about my statement and recognizing that. So you and I have met. I know you don't know that. I've changed since then.

LM: We all have changed. If we keep living, we change.

JE: Right. Where were you born?

LM: I was born in Enid, Oklahoma. I almost said Enid, America, because I always say that, but Enid, Oklahoma.

JE: Mm-hmm. When were you born?

LM: I was born October 13th, 1948.

JE: So your present age is?

LM: Seventy-five.

JE: Okay. Little did you know when you were born that you'd have a street named after you, Leona Mitchell Boulevard.

LM: Right.

JE: That's pretty cool.

LM: It's really cool.

JE: And the Leona Mitchell Southern Heights Heritage Center and Museum. And that Governor Brad Henry made you Oklahoma State Cultural Ambassador.

LM: Right. Listen, I can remember myself, I lived at 211 East Oklahoma in Enid, and I can remember as a little girl, you know, gazing in the mirror. By the way, one of 15 children. And to the dismay of my brothers, I'm in there looking in the mirror, and I can hear myself singing something. Little did I know all this would come about, you know. But they're knocking on the door in the bathroom, because there's so many children.

JE: Oh, because you were in the bathroom singing.

LM: "Get out of there." But yeah, I had no idea.

JE: No, no, no. Okay. About your mother, your mother's name.

LM: Pearl Mitchell. Yes.

JE: Was she known as Doctor?

LM: Yes, Doctor. They both got their Doctorates in Music. My dad as a preacher and my mom as a pianist.

JE: And what was she like? And where was she born? Where did she come from?

LM: My mom was born in Kingfisher, Oklahoma. And she was raised up until 10 years old in Denver, Colorado, because her mother had moved to Colorado to teach. Her mother was a schoolteacher. So Pearl came back to Oklahoma at 10.

They had a farm out there in Kingfisher. So she had this little idyllic little... She was an only child. And my mother and father, they had 15 children, but she was an only child. And so anyway, yeah.

JE: What was her personality, outgoing?

LM: Oh, actually, she was not so... She was a little bit quiet in spirit. But with 15 children, that was almost necessary. She kind of kept the peace and calm and organization. Yes, she was very organized. She later became, after having all the children, she went back to school and became a nurse.

JE: Oh, okay. So was she nurturing in music?

LM: Oh, gosh, yes. Yes. My father, the family, actually the first five were called the Musical Mitchells. And they sang gospel throughout Kansas and Texas and Oklahoma, a little semi-professional group. And so I was hearing all this music. My dad was a minister. And so in our household, there were all kinds of instruments.

My dad could play anything by ear, saxophone, guitar. He just could play anything. And so he almost required his children to pick up something

and play it, because the five, they all had an instrument they played as they sang these gospel music.

JE: Did you try any instrument?

LM: Oh, yes, I tried. I tried. I have a story to tell. My eldest brother, I guess, he told me. He told me later in life that when I was about two or three, they were rehearsing in the home, and I was trying to hum along. And he said, "you can't sing. You're too little." And he said, "you showed us, didn't you, little? Get out of here, you little thing."

But yeah. Yeah. So it was a lot of music in my home, just constantly. And I have an interesting story about my mother. I'm the 10th child. And she said, "well, you know what? I'm going to try this old wives tale and see if it's true. I'm going to dedicate this child to music."

JE: Wow.

LM: Interesting.

JE: Yes. Yes. So then your father's name was?

LM: Hulon. It's a very unusual name. I've never heard anybody else name that. H-U-L-O-N. Hulon Mitchell. Yeah. No middle name. Just Hulon Mitchell.

JE: And he was Reverend and then Doctor, too.

LM: Yes.

JE: Yes. Reverend Doctor Hulon Mitchell.

LM: Right.

JE: And so what church was he ministering?

LM: We were at Church of God in Christ. That was our lineage. That's my lineage from Church of God in Christ.

JE: And then was he, how did he get to Oklahoma? Was he born here?

LM: Yeah. He was born in Purcell. Purcell, Oklahoma. And he lived his whole life in Oklahoma. And he was one of 10 children.

JE: What's his personality like around here?

LM: Oh, my dad was gregarious. And if he weren't in the church, I think he would have been a real showman out there in the world. Because he could, you know, I likened his, I listened to Billie Holiday's pianists and things. And my dad could do all of that. He was astounding. He was a showman. He was so full of life, his character. He was really big.

My mom was quiet. He was just out there.

JE: But in addition to preaching, he was also a music teacher. He was a musician?

LM: Yes. Oh, yes.

JE: Did he sing?

LM: Oh, yes, yes, yes. Listen, he, when I came along with this opera, because they were all immersed in gospel and things like that, he was my biggest fan. He was 6'3", almost 6'4". My mom was 5'2".

You know, when he would come to performances, I say, he would be the first on his feet. And I said, oh, my God, you can see that that was my dad cheering his daughter on. He was just, you know, he, yeah, he was so proud, you know, that I was this opera singer, he just was really proud.

JE: So then since he was a minister, was he, did you have Bible readings or devotions and all that?

LM: Oh, gosh, gosh. My whole young life was so immersed in the church. We went six days a week. And I was, I was the choir director. I was, my mom did the piano and my brothers played instruments, guitars. It was very, like the churches are now, the avant-garde churches now, but we had drums

and guitars.

So it was really lively. And I think I would liken it to the gospel singer, like James Cleveland kind of style. And so we were just going about the state singing at other churches and busy. My life was so busy as a kid.

JE: You had music in your system and you couldn't stop it, could you?

LM: I still can't stop it. I'm always humming.

JE: So in the birth order, where do you come?

LM: Number 10.

JE: Number 10.

LM: And the last daughter is five girls. And I was the last daughter that they had. I had five boys over me and five under me.

JE: Oh, okay.

LM: Yeah, quite a, quite a troop.

JE: So then your father and mother, what's in Genesis, God said, be fruitful and multiply?

LM: Yeah, I'm laughing because I was at a, I think it was for Gerald Ford. I was singing and Cary Grant was there and he got up and talked. And after I sang, he said, "you know what, Leona, I think God did say replenish the earth, but I didn't think he meant for your dad to do it all by himself."

My dad loved that story because we all just chuckled. It was really clever.

JE: What Grant was there?

LM: Cary Grant, the actor.

JE: Really?

LM: Yeah, yeah. So he just made those comments because he was so amazed that I was one of 15.

JE: Man, when would that have been?

LM: That was right when Gerald Ford, right after Nixon, right after that thing, right in that point.

JE: And Cary Grant, man. Oh, yeah. In person, was he?

LM: Oh, yes. He was, I've had an interesting life. Morris Olivier was one of my favorite, favorite people. Yeah.'

JE: Because he-

LM: Because he loved opera and I was singing with the Covent Garden Opera on tour. And he just came to be with the opera company and just enjoy the music. And he was so, such a, not like his characters at all. He was this little man.

It was toward the ends of his life. And he would just sit there quietly. And finally the people told me, "do you know who you're talking to?" And I went, "no." And they said, "that's Lawrence Olivier." He was just such a gentle, wonderful person.

JE: Such a great actor. But he was-

LM: Yeah. But this career has allowed me to meet with many people and be around a lot of different people.

Chapter 3 – 8:18 It Took a Teacher

John Erling (JE): Let's bring you back to your education-

Leona Mitchell (LM): Back to the childhood.

JE: And grade school. You went to what grade school?

LM: I went to Carver Elementary. At the time, we were still segregated. So I went one through six through a segregated school. It was called Carver Elementary. And then my rest of my education was in the Enid school system with Emerson Junior High and then Enid High. Everybody had to go to Enid High.

JE: When did segregation come in?

LM: It was right in 1960, around '60.

JE: So you were in- Is that when you went to Enid High School?

LM: No, I went to the junior high then.

JE: It was in junior high they segregated.

LM: They became integrated.

JE: Right. Do you remember that?

LM: Oh, I remember it vividly.

JE: Was that tough? Was that-

LM: It was difficult, I think, more for the boys than me, than girls. Because I don't know if it's our personality, women at the time. We just maybe took things maybe easier. But for me, it was wonderful.

And the children, children are children. And they don't act out at all unless grown people get involved with it. So they were just, we were all there together and it was a wonderful experience. Matter of fact, one of the girls that I went from junior high to high school, we even went to college together. And so it was easy. So I'm going to put it like that.

And then the music, I got involved with the choir. I tell you what, I was going to be an instrumentalist. I played the violin. I got into the section and I just realized something told me, I said, "can I change? I don't want to do the violin anymore." And they said, "well, yeah, okay, we're going to put you with the choir."

So is that amazing? I wouldn't have been this opera singer. I would have been a violinist. Boy, but something told me to just- And they let me change. Wow.

JE: I took violin for about two, three lessons and the string broke, so I quit.

LM: And you said that's it? Yeah, yeah, yeah. So anyway, that was, I don't know if that was divine intervention or what.

JE: Well, that choir director, who was that?

LM: Oh, I call her my other mother. That was Ms. Maureen Preeby. She was the choir director in high school, the Enid High School. And she had wanted to sing opera and she had gone to New York. And studied and everything. And because her mother didn't want her to leave Oklahoma, she came back from New York and became a schoolteacher.

JE: So then she introduced you to opera.

LM: Yes, she did.

JE: Did she show you something?

LM: Oh, she gave me, she had me listen. I'll tell you how that happened. I was in choir and just singing. I was singing the lower voice. And that girl that I'm talking about that went through junior high, she was sitting next to me as a mezzo, I guess you call altos. And so she, I could hum along and sing these high notes.

And I would hum under my breath while the sopranos were singing. So she couldn't get these sopranos to do this really high note. And so the girl next to me, Marilyn, said, "Leona can do it." And I could have killed her. And

I went, "what?" And so that began, she heard me and she heard my voice. And she went, and you know what? I listened later, John. She made some 78s. And I listened to one of her opera arias that I became famous for.

And our voices were really similar.

JE: Oh, really?

LM: Oh, I get chills. Yes. Yes. And she, you know what? She was such a beautiful soul. Now, the kids would beg to differ about that because she was a real stickler. But to me, she would take me to teach me this opera. She'd come pick me up every morning at 7 o'clock before school to teach it to me.

JE: Oh, wow.

LM: Let me just jump forward. As I went early, you know, in my career at the Met. But she came there. She didn't like to fly. But she came and she flew. And she cried all night. Because that could have been her.

JE: Yeah. But then to see that she...

LM: Oh, my God. To see her dream, yes.

JE: And to know that she had introduced you to it.

LM: Yes. Yes. This was amazing to her.

JE: Do you think if you had not been introduced by her to opera, there's...

LM: Oh, no. No. I would never have done it.

JE: Because your life would...

LM: Never. Never. I was in gospel and I was not doing that at all. When I first heard opera, John, I went, "oh, my God, they sing like that? Oh, I wonder if I can do that."

JE: Yeah. And so Maureen... Maureen Maury Preeby was my goddess. She was my goddess and my guide.

JE: Wow.

LM: And she directed me to come to OCU to that teacher there. She had heard that Inez Silberg, that was my next lady in Oklahoma that got me to that next level.

JE: So to be clear then, you went through grade school and junior high. And then it was in your last year of high school that Maureen introduced you to it before you went off to do anything. Yes. And she said what... Maybe you would have gone to college to become a professor or something.

LM: I was going to college and I was trying to decide I wanted to be an ambassador. I never heard of a black ambassador, but I don't know, something just told me I wanted to be an ambassador. I had had three years of Spanish in my Enid school system and three years of French and I was very good in my languages. Isn't that something? But in my mind, I wanted to be an ambassador. Well, I became a real ambassador.

JE: Yes, you did.

LM: But anyway.

JE: Absolutely.

LM: So... I'm jumping ahead in the story.

JE: So then you decided to go to what college?

LM: Well, she... I met... I mean, Ms. Preeby physically drove me. I was going to go to Stillwater or Langston or somewhere, just a smaller college. But she drove me to audition to the music school in OCU.

JE: Oklahoma City University.

LM: University. And I had no idea. I had never been there on an audition. I didn't know what that meant. But she made me take that aria that she taught me and that duet from Aida. And I went and sang. And then Inez Silberg, she said, "are you sure she's 17?" And my voice was mature. Are you sure she's 17? Yes. And then she left the room and I didn't know what had happened. I thought, okay, so I did this for Ms. Preeby. I guess that's it. And she came back with a whole music school to hear me.

She said, "this is a special voice. I want everybody." She brought everybody there. And she said, there's no money. She's one of 15. I found out later at 50 years old that I was the first voice student that they had given a full scholarship to.

JE: They gave you a scholarship.

LM: A full scholarship to that very expensive school.

JE: But you thought, "I'm going to school. I can't pay for this. Yeah, I didn't. So it must have dawned on you you had a scholarship at the time. I just got it. It was a big deal. Oh, yes. In Enid, they actually, in the programs when I got that scholarship, they wrote up, "well, she beat out the football player. She got the Pinker Scholars." That was news to them. They didn't care about the opera, but they thought you beat.

JE: They were going to give it to a quarterback.

LM: Right, right. So anyway, that was cool. Right. That was really cool. But yeah, those two ladies in Oklahoma were instrumental in me becoming the opera singer that I became. They were very instrumental. Yes.

JE: So then you graduated with a bachelor's in music.

LM: In music, yes. But more than that, that education that I had at OCU, mind you, I was 21 or 22. And by 24, I was rehearsing at the Met. That's not ever done. I don't even know anybody that's done this. And it's like God had his hand in it, because that's all I can say.

JE: Well, I believe that.

LM: Because I believe it. It's just, you know, it's not a road that a lot of people have been able to do. No. Yeah, my education at OCU helped me immensely, because I got to do operas there. I was the first opera that I saw I was in. That's so cute, but I was. No, no, so the Figaro, and they had put me in costumes and everything.

And I got to move on stage and have experience. And what an education I got at OCU.

JE: Oh, that's right, because you'd just been singing for your teacher and all. Yeah. And you'd never been in a performance before.

LM: No, I never really sang opera, and then I was in it. Oh, it was such an edgy, oh, it was like Pandora's box for me. It was so interesting. Wow.

Chapter 4 – 12:28

No Talk

John Erling (JE): But then you went on to New York for graduate studies.

Leona Mitchell (LM): Yes, yes. But before that, I went, this OCU, this Inez Silberg had me enter all these contests, national contests. She did that with all of her students. We became known around, especially around the tri-state at Texas and Oklahoma and Kansas. Her students were always winning these contests.

So by the time I finished university, I won 30-some national contests and money and things. And the one that got me to opera was the one I won in San Francisco. It got me to San Francisco from Oklahoma. That's my jump. And I went to a program there. And it was very, you know, I was the youngest person in that program, 22 years old, because most of them were 27, 8.

And they were really trying to launch their careers. And so I remember them discussing me because I was the youngest. And they said, "oh, she

can't win. She's too young." And I won that whole thing, right? And they were a little flabbergasted. But Kurt Adler chose me to be the winner. And that started my semi-professional that got me with San Francisco Spring Opera.

JE: But you did go to the Juilliard School in New York.

LM: Yes, that was after that.

JE: Oh, after that.

LM: After the Spring Opera.

JE: Oh, okay.

LM: Yeah. And then I went to New York. I got a manager, Columbia artist, one of the top managers there. He'd heard me in Santa Fe. I'd done a program, an artist program and won that. And he heard me in Santa Fe and took me on. And then that made me go to New York and audition for different things, different companies. And then I auditioned at Juilliard. And they wanted me bad.

They actually almost, I didn't get in trouble, but it was awful. They already had a soprano doing that opera I had never done, La Boheme. And they heard my voice and they said, "we want her." And I tell you, they enrolled me in that Juilliard so that I could do that opera for them. And it was a huge success.

JE: So that was scholarship, obviously, too then?

LM: Well, no, it was really semi-professional, sort of. I had to be a student, but it was a trade-off, actually. I got to go to that intense training there and then do that opera. And I made straight A's, right?

JE: Mm-hmm.

LM: But the young lady that was to do it, they pulled her off. It was really sad. But I had nothing to do with that. But they wanted me.

JE: Pulled you off from where?

LM: They pulled her off of the part that they gave me. She was already the soprano.

JE: But that's at the Met, though, isn't it?

LM: No, no, this is in Juilliard. And so then they put me in it. Oh, my God. But I got all this New York Times publicity from that. I mean, people paid people to get that kind of publicity. I got it.

JE: You know, we've moved pretty fast through your career.

LM: Yes. It was fast.

JE: But since you're African American, through all that up to here, was there prejudice?

LM: Leontyne kind of paved that way. She had just made her debut at the Met in 1965.

JE: Leontyne Price.

LM: Yes, Leontyne Price. She was a real, you know, like Marian Anderson did it, but it was like at the end of her career and just a few performances. But Leontyne Price was the actual first black diva that was likened to the Collision, to all of those that was allowed there.

So that had opened the doors. And so by '75, when I came along, those doors were open.

JE: Don't you think music and your voice breaks down those racial barriers?

LM: Oh, yeah, absolutely. But there were a lot of, there was a book written, I think her name is Rosalynn. She was from Tulsa about black sopranos and how even in the late 1800s, they were black sopranos. And they let them sing in Europe, but they couldn't sing in America. So it was a lot of great

voices that, you know, even though they had the great voices, they couldn't come here.

Yeah, it was one soprano, I can't remember her name, that was just before Leontyne. And they were talking about her in New York, how fabulous she was. But Leontyne was the one that got there. And she was right on the hills with Martin Luther. So it was like opened it. It opened it completely.

JE: She's still living.

LM: She's 97.

JE: 97. Wow. Have you ever met her?

LM: She kind of took me on.

JE: Did she really?

LM: Oh, yes. She was so gracious and so wonderful. She would call me Miss Mitchell. Yes, yes. So she had a talk with me and we did all of that kind of stuff.

JE: Yeah. And of course.

LM: Everybody's idol. All American, not just black, but she was an idol to many sopranos. Yeah. Great soprano.

JE: When, like when you were in Julliard, and other students were there.

LM: Yes.

JE: Did you think that there were some there who were extraordinary?

LM: Yes, they were.

JE: But they dropped out for some reason and they didn't.

LM: Yes. That happened. So one went on. One tenor became famous. We were in the cast together. And one conductor, he became a very famous opera conductor. The conductor and the tenor from that production that I was in, his career was launched all over Europe and everything. Neil Shikoff and the conductor, James Conlon, who runs the Los Angeles Opera now.

He became famous and conducted everywhere. And one of the other parts, she was wonderful, but I don't know what happened. But she ended up teaching. But she was lovely from there. So, yeah.

JE: You know, you were in Santa Fe. You had an apprenticeship, didn't you?

LM: Yes, I won an apprenticeship there, won a contest.

JE: I can relate to Santa Fe because my wife and I attended that beautiful outdoor venue for opera. audience

LM: Isn't it wonderful?

JE: It's beautiful.

LM: Mmm. It's so spectacular. It just transports you into another world just sitting in an audience, right? And you're outside.

JE: I think you see mountains in the back there.

LM: Yeah. It is so, yes.

JE: And you sung on that stage.

LM: Oh, yes. I was there as an apprentice and then I came back and did as an artist. I did Donna Anna there in Santa Fe.

JE: And then I liked because they had the words in front of us.

LM: Yeah. So you could, that was pre, now everybody does that. But see, Santa Fe started that.

JE: Is that right?

LM: Yeah. The Met, they wouldn't do it for years, but now they do it. Yes.

JE: Well, it brings in more people.

LM: Yes. Especially, you know, the American audiences don't speak all these languages.

JE: No. Yeah. So it's wonderful.

LM: Right. It's fabulous.

JE: And then understanding it, so it brings people back.

LM: Right. Right. Yeah.

JE: That was a beautiful, beautiful, beautiful venue.

LM: Oh, Santa Fe is wonderful.

JE: But Kurt Adler stayed with you. He was supportive in many areas.

LM: Oh, yes. He's one that I made a recording with, Kurt Adler. Yes. He was very instrumental in my beginning of my career. I would actually run things through him, because I was so new. And I actually asked him about my future manager. And he says he hated managers, because he was into nuts, so he was always ragging with the manager.

But he would tell me, I remember, I wish I'd kept that letter. He says, "well, as far as managers go, I think he's a great manager." That killed him to say that. But yeah, so I felt, because it was a sea of nothing. I didn't know anything. So I didn't know what this meant. I didn't know what the manager meant. But yeah, so he said, yeah, you would do well going with him. And I did.

JE: I'm thinking about your parents right now. And you're off in New York, and you're in your early 20s. Are they checking in on you?

LM: Early twenties, yes. Oh, gosh, yes. Yes. But I was married. I was married at the last year of my bachelor's. And my husband was killed a year later in a car accident.

JE: What was his name?

LM: His name was Robert House. So I was Leona House. But because of that, I was a really mature young woman. And so I could take care of myself. And so, yeah, but they would check on me. So I have a lovely story about my mom later on with she and Ms. Preeby and vying for my attention, because I was traveling 30 days a year for 30 years, and I was always gone.

So it was precious when I could come home at some point and visit family. And so mom, she was always used to sharing me with everyone. And, you know, but this is the one time she just got, I never seen my mother like that, but it was at the end. She said, "well, I want to have my daughter. I want to be with my daughter myself. Do I have to? Can't you just be with me?" And so she told Ms. Preeby that. And Ms. Preeby said, "okay, I'll back out. We don't have to have lunch today. Ms. Mitchell, go ahead."

But my mother, and then another cute story about my mom was, because I was very regimented when I sang, and I think that's what kept me have longevity. I learned that from Inez Silberg. I would have, I would start a regime where the night before I sang, I wouldn't use my voice. I would rest, you know, because operas are sung. If people don't know this, we sing to houses of three, four, 5,000 people without microphones. So we have to have great strength, and you have to take care of that little instrument inside of you.

You have to take care of it and take care of yourself. So anyway, I would go in this regime where I wouldn't speak. So my mom, she loved to talk, talk, talk. And so I said, mom, "I have to cut off now." And then she made this statement. She said, "you know what? You are so eccentric these days." She used to not have an accent.

JE: What time of afternoon or evening did you cut off?

LM: Oh, about 10 o'clock at night. I was not. Oh, no, no, no.

JE: I thought it would've been earlier.

LM: No, no. And then the whole next day until I went to the performance.

Okay. And you wouldn't use your voice at all. And Leontyne was even more than me. I heard she would go weeks and she wouldn't, she would entertain people. She had to, because she was really, people were really judging her.

JE: Who?

LM: Leontyne Price.

JE: Okay.

LM: So she had a much harder regiment than me.

JE: So then describe an operatic voice. Obviously has to be a really strong.

LM: Strong. It has to be strong because you're singing over 120 instruments, playing at the loudest. And you're singing in big halls with three and 4,000 people. And so you're having to really have a huge sound. You have pop singers and jazz singers. They're all singing with the mics in their throat.

We have no such thing. So if I'm singing, which I'm starting now, it's light jazz. So I would sing with a mic and I would sing, and when October goes, the world begins to shine. I'll do like that. Now, if I'm singing opera, I'll go, just a moment, microphone. I'll go (singing). See the decibels of sound. It's just night and day.

JE: You just gave me goosebumps.

LM: Oh, really? But it's night and day. So it's a big production. And I liken it to swimmers or you have to really be strong in your body to support that kind of sound.

JE: So did you work out at all?

LM: No, they do now. The singers do now. But we have certain physical exercises we do with our diaphragms and things. But I think you have to come with that kind of voice to kind of, you're either born with that kind of voice or you're not.

JE: The strength. Right. Right. But do you sing now?

LM: Do I still sing opera a little bit? Yes. Because I do some concerts. Matter of fact, I'm going in April as saying half opera, half jazz.

JE: Oh, where? Where is that going to be?

LM: It's going to be at the Opera America Hall in New York City, in Manhattan.

JE: Oh, wow.

LM: And so it's going to be a new, different thing for people to hear me do both.

JE: So you're going to, the first half, jazz?

LM: The first half would be jazz. Jazz and Broadway. I could have danced all night kind of thing. And then the second half is total, total in this lower voice. That other soprano, this is contralto tenor.

JE: Because your voice?

LM: Because that's what I'm, it's natural for me and comfortable. And actually, when I did gospel when I was a child, that was my natural voice.

JE: So has your voice changed since now you're seven?

LM: Well, I think as you get older, it maybe mellows and get a little bit thicker. Like that, too. Yeah. Yes, I do think that. But personally, saying that opera singers, generally, they don't sing after a certain point sopranos because their voices, they'll get lower and they can't always reach those higher

notes. So I was kind of different because Collis and Tobaldi, they were all not singing after 35, but I was just getting started.

Chapter 5 – 4:55
New York Met

John Erling (JE): Then in '73, you made your debut with the San Francisco Opera.

Leona Mitchell (LM): Right.

JE: in Carmen.

LM: Yes, Micaela.

JE: Right. But then in 1975, in the same role, you made your debut with the Metropolitan Opera.

LM: Yes.

JE: In December of '75.

LM: That's right.

JE: And then you went on for 18 seasons, right. Now, isn't it true that your first performance was just at that last moment?

LM: Oh, gosh, yes. They told you. Let me tell about it. It was with the greatest tenor on earth, Placido Domingo. I wasn't just stepping in there with anybody. I mean, can you imagine you putting an ingenue person right in there with that kind of talent? And then Regine Crespin, great soprano.

And the reason I got that job is I had done the Juilliard thing. It was such a buzz. And, you know, I was starting to, I'd done a European debut in Barcelona, Spain. So that was all that was under my belt. So, you know, little things in America, like maybe singing in English with Houston Opera

or something like that, but no big deal things.

But the reason I got it is the guy that was an administrator at the Met now had been one in San Francisco. So he heard me. He knew about my ascent. He knew I could handle this. And he was, he told the administration, one of the sopranos at Council from Europe. And they said, he said, "I know who can sing that. Leona Mitchell." "Who?" "Leona Mitchell."

And so I go and I rehearse in a room and I don't see those principals. Until I get on the stage. I had never been on that big stage, never sang with that orchestra or anything. But my background from OCU carried me on. I, Placido came back with and he said, "Hello, I'm Placido." He was meeting me back there. And he said, "Are you afraid?" Because he knew it was my debut. And I said, "No, no," I was just this little girl. "Oh, no, no. I have to get out there and sing. Excuse me."

And I went out there and did that. And it was such a. Big deal. I mean, I have I don't even know how this happened, but the New York Press was there. They'd heard that about that Juilliard thing. So they came in and reviewed it. This is so unheard of to be when you just step in again. But it was a big success, huge success. So God was with me.

JE: And once you're twenty five years old.

LM: Twenty five. It just turned twenty five in October.

JE: Many who are not up on opera. And I will say I come prepared for this, but I don't. I don't have the credentials about opera. I will say that here. But we've all heard of Placido Domingo. What was he like? Was he-

LM: Oh, he's Placido. Is it's like he is on. He's just a joyful, non ego, proud person. He's just, you know, he's very secure in his tech, in his voice and what he was doing. He was just on a high, you know, he was written very few tenors. Like him. He was-

JE: He was Spanish, wasn't he?

LM: Yes. Yes. From Spain. Right.

JE: But then as long as we're talking about famous names, Luciano Pavarotti, you're saying with him as well.

LM: Yes. Right after that. Yeah.

JE: Really? Yeah.

LM: And we did a movie together. We did a it's a cult movie. It was called Yes, George. But Luciano, I did a lot with Luciano. And the I got to know Luciano better when we did that movie because we were on, you know, always to get makeup and things and stuff. But I. Yeah. Luciano. We did, you know, I was friends with Luciano in San Francisco.

We just sang many things together. And he was truly one of a kind.

JE: Italian. Yeah.

LM: Oh, my God. But not just Italian, but he was one of a kind.

JE: But he sang. Did he do many different languages?

LM: Oh, yes. But he sang mostly his Italian things. He was known for that. He could do them, of course. That's about the Europeans. They're all so close together. They all speak French and all of them. You know, they can. Singers speak all those languages because they're so close to each country.

But that's that's that's what's not so nice in America because we have to really learn all of it.

JE: But it's nice to know that these two that we've talked about were so supportive of you and welcoming because, you know, they well they understood they saw the talents.

LM: Oh, yes.

JE: They sang with everybody. And so.

LM: Yeah. And and, you know, I'm well, anyway, I have something I'm not telling it on the radio, but it's something very private Luciano told me. Yeah. I'm very I'm tearing because it's just he wanted to tell me that. And so, yeah, I'll always take it with me because he's very, very supportive.

JE: That's because he admired you so much and you guys became close. And so your secret will remain a secret.

LM: I'm not telling it because it's just it's just really private. It was wonderful.

JE: Right.

Chapter 6 – 7:03

Favorite Opera

John Erling (JE): The popularity of opera in the United States. Mm hmm. How does that compare to European?

Leona Mitchell (LM): Oh, gosh, it was totally different. You know, it's more of a Europe – in Europe, you're a household name, the football players and actresses are in America. I got in a taxi. I was even just starting out in Italy. I was getting ready to do one of the cities there in Italy and the taxi driver. Once he found out I was this aspiring opera singer, I was like gold to him. He was like, "Oh, my God", this and that. And they just they and then and I remember singing there like at the big arena in Verona.

They practically picked me up on a carpet and once they heard me do Aida and then I knew when you walk in the restaurant, they're clapping and they oh, it's just it's a whole 'nother thing. Whole they that's their language and they just appreciate it and they thank you for doing their music and keeping it in high esteem. Yeah, yeah.

JE: So soccer and opera.

LM: Yeah, I'm telling you, it's just amazing that being in Europe is something. Yeah, yeah, something I was when I it was one of the other big venues that have like, I don't know, 15 outdoor arenas. The Verona, did Verona, and then also the Rome Opera has their their big deal that they do. And I did Aida. I did Aida out there and and they just they likened me to their collars and people. I mean, they were really appreciative. So I had a good run, a good run.

JE: One of the reviewers called your voice huge and gorgeous. Huge and gorgeous.

LM: Wow. Yeah. Some of the young singers now they go, you mean you're just this tall because they heard my voice and they go, "Oh, my God, I can't believe you're this small."

JE: And how tall are you?

LM: I'm about 5'4" Yeah. And they just thought I was 5'10 and big sound. They could just believe that. They said, "Where does all that come from?" But I just I don't know. God blessed.

JE: Well, we see a lot of opera people that are really big. Yeah. Huge.

LM: Yeah.

JE: And we think they have to be that size.

LM: And they and we thought that to opera singers, you know, you take you indulge yourself. Nobody.

JE: You're very slender now.

LM: Now I'm really slender now. But I was maybe a little bit more hefty, maybe 25, 30. 30 more pounds.

JE: What did you feel?

LM: But I never was huge.

JE: Did you did you think you needed that weight?

LM: Well, I think the lifestyle was just conducive to.

JE: Oh, yeah.

LM: You know, it's party after party after the performances. You're having dinner at 11 o'clock at night to two in the morning. It's just an awful thing. I mean, it's great, but you're always eating at all those hours. And so it's and everybody's so festive after performances. And oh, my God, I had a lovely time in France, you know, with all the gorgeous. Just food. It was just fabulous.

JE: But there was a time when they thought, yeah, you had to be big to really.

LM: Yeah. Yeah. You know, especially with the kind of voice that I had, I was a spinto soprano. So I sang the dramatic roles and it does require a big sound. So you do probably need some heft. Maybe I never saw anybody skinny, skinny sing my parts. Yeah. So you have to have some kind of strength, I think.

JE: Right. So you sang with. I met for 18 seasons.

LM: Yeah. All kinds of operas. Yes.

JE: What is your favorite opera?

LM: Oh, people would ask me that. And I would say and I it was whatever I was doing at the moment I had. There were so many things that I liked about different ones. I loved Puccini because you could act his operas out and sing them. And Verdi required this other finesse. And you had to imbue all kinds of sounds for Verdi. And it's hard to put them all together.

You had to do dramatic coloratura and be all line singing. And it encompassed maybe four different kind of techniques. And his women is very few on your hand that conquer that repertory. So like maybe five in history that have conquered that. Carlos Price to Baldy. And I was

considered in that arena.

And so it was a special blessing. To be able to sing that music.

JE: Didn't you take ballet study ballet?

LM: I did in my little old OCU days. They were well-rounded.

JE: You think that helped you in your performance? I also yes movement. I was in San Francisco when they had me do fencing, I did all kind of things in my background. Yeah. But ballet, I did some dance classes and specifically when I learned Butterfly, I studied with an actor, an Oriental actor, just to do Oriental movements.

And then we went through every line of my opera for me to learn to be this geisha. So I was really privileged to have one of those actors do that with me.

JE: Are you a quick study?

LM: Mm hmm.

JE: So it comes to you pretty fast. You were just.

LM: Yeah, my coach that coached all these operas with me as I was learning them. He was saying, "Oh my God, you can really learn fast." So yeah, I learned a big repertory and I own and not only did opera, see, I was a recitalist, which is totally different with classical music, but you're learning all the Brahms and the Schubert and and you're just standing up there with the piano and singing.

I have vast amount of repertory for that all while I was doing all these 30 some operas, huge. I call them like, I don't know, bigger than thesis. You know, you're learning all in these different languages. I mostly did Italian, but I did French operas. I did German and then Spanish. I sang in and you know, so I amassed this classical repertory and recital work.

And then I did also just pieces Mendelssohn's. I did oratorios. And so I was a

busy girl. I sang with the major symphonies, almost all of them with the classical or mostly classical, you know, recitalist things, and I did recitals and all over Japan. I don't know. I just did. I did recitals everywhere.

JE: So recitals and opera, you like both the same.

LM: Oh, yes, because, well, and it was kind of important. I think it's kind of snubbed the recital world. You know, they say "they just do opera, you know." But anyway, they have these fights amongst themselves. And then and then the conductors are always happy when you can do the oratorios because you're studied and you know music. And so it's it. It pulls on different arenas in your brain to do. So I was able to do three of those different types of things.

Chapter 7 – 10:15

Prejudice

John Erling (JE): You know, you were so fortunate to be able to go to Oklahoma City University to be at home and live in that and that they had that strong department.

Leona Mitchell (LM): Isn't it? Wasn't that amazing?

JE: And I don't think any other college in Oklahoma has it.

LM: They hadn't produced that kind of in that field. And she produced, you know, several of her singers sang at the Met and City Opera, New York City. Opera and over in, you know, Europe. So she, Inez Silberg, she produced a lot because she was a great teacher. And then the department worked with her to help us do operas.

I mean, did we actually we had members from the Oklahoma City Symphony that were conducting us, and it was really magnificent. I couldn't have put that together. God did that. I couldn't. How could I know where to go or anything?

JE: Right. Yeah. For those of you who want to listen to Leona's voice, all you need to do is Google or go to YouTube, go to YouTube. And I have listened to several of your songs and opera by YouTube. So be sure to listen to Leona's voice. It will just blow you away. Did you like living in New York?

LM: Well, I was right in New York. I was two blocks from the Met. I was on 67th and Broadway. We had an apartment on the 40th floor. But yes. And it was so hectic for me at that time. I love New York, but I was not just in New York. I was always moving about. I would be in New York, you know, maybe three weeks and then I'm off to Australia.

I went to Australia 30, I mean, 25 years in a row. I learned a lot of my roles there. And I love my opera house because my room, my dressing room, the boats, you could see sailing. Oh, God, that was so romantic and fabulous in Australia. So I loved my time there.

And then I would also be just all over. You know, Europe, you know, six weeks here, four weeks there. We were jumping about all the time. Actually, I looked at one of my books that I kept and I just got exhausted looking at it because in the midst of all of this, we're doing interviews for papers, TV. And so you have to schedule all of this.

And then I had a child. I had a child at 30. I mean, I was no, I was 34. And I remember I was on tour with the Met. They did tours in the United States. And I was seven months pregnant and I was getting so tired and big. And I was doing their Nani. They kept teasing me. The conductor said, You're not going to have that baby on stage. And then I had to put that in the mix. And so when the baby was born, he was six weeks old and I went straight to Berlin.

I was making my debut singing Aida. This little baby was all over the world traveling with me. So that was that was that was different and hard.

JE: And that little baby. And his name?

LM: His name is Elmer. He was named after his dad. My husband passed away ten years ago, but he was named after his father. He's the Elmer, the

fourth. And he's a high functioning, autistic young man. So he's still with me.

JE: Hmm. How old is he now?

LM: He's 39.

JE: But there was a time then at the Mets that they dismissed you and after 18 seasons.

LM: Yeah. And I was still producing. So you can see a lot of things on YouTube. They couldn't. they didn't say I was not singing well. But I don't know, it just seemed to be that's the way they did at the Met. They kind of – I remember when I came in they were trying to usher out some of the old artists and I remember the great James Jones Sutherland and Marilyn Horn, they were getting they were bringing in the new.

And so they fought, though, Marilyn and those, they fought to stay a little bit longer. And so I think because right after me, I think, two years later, they let Kathy Battle go and they let Jesse Norman go.

So that's how it was. They thought they wanted to bring in the new and they're letting out all this gold. You don't need to do that until the people actually cannot produce it anymore.

JE: You were in your mid-30s?

LM: No, no. I was 43.

JE: 43.

LM: Yeah, but I still had – there are YouTubes of me at 63 singing and so I still had a lot left. And so I sang all over Europe after this. A lot of videos of me doing things after that point.

JE: But what did that do to your ego?

LM: My ego, it was horrible. Because I wanted to be like Luciano and them. I wanted to do the 25th silver anniversary which I, and by the way, there has been no other soprano that's been there, in my flock, that's been the leading soprano that's been there 18 seasons. They normally are five, or six, or seven.

Come back here and there so I'd already had a huge run there, so. But I really wanted to do the 25th year but I didn't get to do it.

JE: It affected your nerves, I suppose, huh? When when that all happened to you?

LM: Oh no but besides you they cut your money off. It was terrible.

JE: But then you were earning money elsewhere.

LM: I know but it still starts to creep in. And a matter of fact, I had a... right after that, it was a horrible situation. Because people said, "Leona Mitchell just fell off the map." People didn't know what happened. Some devious people were saying they retired me. They said, "she's retired." I didn't say that, but they were putting word out I was retired.

And then some were saying, "well, she's just not singing as well." And so I remember I was to sing in the United States, a concert, and this lady from, I don't know, Federation of Music or whatever, I agreed to do a concert. And then she calls me back and she says, "well, you know, do you think we could get rid of the contract because I heard you're not singing well?" Oh, it killed me. I never thought I'd hear that in my life.

And I said, "oh, my God." I remember I was going to Australia to do something right after that at a big opera. And I said, "no, I am not retired and I'm singing well." And it was just before the Internet was taken off, so I didn't have a big discography. And so I couldn't really send. I used to show her that.

But I said, "no, we're not doing the contract. I will be there and I will sing." Well, when I finished singing, the whole she didn't know what to say. The whole audience came to my feet because I was still, I mean, it was me.

JE: Okay. And this is where?

LM: In Arkansas. I was in Arkansas singing a concert. Okay. And so she was just flabbergasted. And I felt bad for her because she was just a piano player. I mean, she wasn't really she didn't know, but she was horrified. That she treated me that way and she was horrified that I really could sing, but she had been told I couldn't.

And she hated that she had put me through that. But yeah, it was terrible.

JE: I hate to bring up is prejudice involved in any of this?

LM: Oh, no. Okay. Not that.

JE: No, no, right.

LM: I did have one just one occasion that that happened to me. I was to sing Donna Anna in Glyndebourne, I think, and the director was – didn't want a black soprano. And I never knew about it except one of the other major singers was told and he wrote about it in his book or one director told about it. So I didn't know about that. But that was the only time.

Other than that, no.

JE: Were there many blacks in opera?

LM: Oh, God, in Europe. In Europe. Yeah. Now, I had a time because when I went to the Met, there were not many black men singers at all. None. Hardly none. And so I mentioned of that in Opera News and it got me in big trouble because they didn't want me to talk about the racism and for black men. And so I think that followed me.

As a matter of fact, some of my managers and everybody told me that was that went against me. They thought I was a troublemaker. So I spoke out about black men.

JE: Would have affected you?

LM: It affected me all along because they affected me in the record business because they wouldn't record me. And I was they they I was just God was letting me sing so well that they really couldn't get rid of me for a while. But they didn't really want me. I was a symbol about that.

JE: Okay. So then, yes, you needed to do more albums to prove yourself.

LM: Yes.

JE: And so you had a hard time getting a label to sign on to you.

LM: Yes, they wouldn't do it.

JE: And because of?

LM: Because of some of that controversy with black men. It really came to that.

JE: Wow.

LM: And it worked against me.

JE: But did you end up you-

LM: I did a few recordings, but nothing like I should have had. I should have been a household name like Kathy Battle or Jesse, because I was doing all the elite, elite galas, elite performances and new productions at the Met and everything. But I was not getting that where you didn't have to prove yourself every single time you stepped on the stage.

JE: So then I suppose you get to think-

LM: Oh, it was a horrible time for me.

JE: Do really people like me?

LM: Oh, God, it was awful.

JE: Didn't you sing in Mexico? It was such a moving experience for you.

LM: It was because because it was after that time they had been let go. Oh, yeah, it was so moving. Wow.

JE: Well, I saw you through YouTube come out on stage.

LM: You saw me crying and the applause. Oh, it's a death.

JE: It was like, hey, people like me.

LM: Oh, my God. It was the applause that you give people that have recordings. Is this the applause? That's what you get. And those are well-known people through their recordings more than even their performances. So I was, you don't get that kind of applause unless you're just either that or that they think you're wonderful. And they did. And this is what I kept getting all along, even as I left the Met. That was the kind of applause. So I knew that. But it was hard.

Chapter 8 – 7:38

Elmer Bush

John Erling (JE): So then let's bring your husband, Elmer Bush.

Leona Mitchell (LM): Yes. And he traveled with me through all of this.

JE: And you met him.

LM: I met him in Los Angeles. I was doing Porgy and Bess. That was my first thing, you know, I got a Grammy for that recording of Porgy and Bess. That is one thing that was right. And 24 years old, I did that recording. But he was there. His friends were in that production and he was a schoolteacher in Los Angeles and he had wanted to study opera and had a beautiful voice.

But he didn't get pushed – black male. So anyway, he knew, he we were

young and we met and clicked. And we got married, I think I was twenty nine, but we were together from me being twenty five to twenty nine and we married. He was with me the whole ride. He was so supportive.

JE: And so you probably couldn't have continued.

LM: I couldn't have done anything for him if it weren't for him. And he pushed me after they let me go like that. Every day he would sit at home and make me go through all my operas to sing full voice. That's how I could sing at 63. I was. I was doing that playing for myself and just singing out loud every day, Tosca and Aida. I do it every day because I don't know.

He just said, "you just have to keep your voice up." He loved it so much. So he didn't mind sitting there listening to that all day.

JE: So then how long were you married?

LM: We were married over 40 years. And he died. Yeah, it was very fast. He had prostate cancer. We had no idea he was gone in two weeks. It was a tragedy. I was just because I didn't know it. I've known him since 24 and he and I was 66, so it was a lifetime. And he was the biggest supporter of all of all.

JE: Then when you moved back to Enid, he became a substitute teacher for Enid Public Schools.

LM: Sometimes we did that and I went to just see what it was like. The kids were so cute. Those little babies were so cute because they knew they knew it was Leona Mitchell because they'd have me do that. Come to a program and say Leona Mitchell and my street and everything. So I remember once I was.

I like little baby kids. I was I wanted to have an experience. I never done that. And so I went in there and I was like with those pre kindergarten is like five year olds and they were adorable to me. But it was such a different experience. But anyway, the little babies, the ones that were eight or nine years old, they knew that that was Leona Mitchell in there.

And they those kids that age, they want autographs. And so they were going to their class and it was causing quite an eruption because those kids." Can you sign my sneaker? Can you sign this?" And those little five year olds. They're like, "what kind of teacher is this?"

JE: Yeah, but wasn't it something that nine and ten year olds.

LM: Oh, God, they were really into that. Sign my shirt. That's Leona Mitchell. They didn't know what opera was, but.

JE: And so Elmer served on the boards of the Enid Symphony Symphony. He collected information for the Harold Hamm Diabetes Center in Oklahoma City.

LM: So he was busy, really.

JE: Really involved in the community.

LM: He was. Oh, they loved him at the symphony that he was all on board with them on the board and actually just doing lots of things with them.

JE: Now you have performed in front of very famous people, many presidents, Reagan, Ford, Carter, President Clinton. And that's all at the White House, I suppose.

LM: Several were at the White House and other like Carter were tied to twice. One at the White House. And then we also did a huge gala in San Francisco. And for some reason, Carter was there. He came to that. That's the first time I met him and Rosslyn. And that's a whole 'nother thing. Frank Sinatra was on that show and he was on that.

JE: Oh my.

LM: We all were at the San Francisco opera and then they had all Dolly – what was her name? She said "hello dolly." Channing. Carol Channing. And we all were doing something, and so I was the representative opera, I sang and so Frank Sinatra brought his band and stuff and so when I finished or

something. Oh Diane, she just died, she was the representative from there at the time. Fine–

JE: Feinstein.

LM: Yeah, yeah,

JE: Senator Diane, yeah.

LM: She was a friend of one of my friends and I was – anyways– but anyway Frank Sinatra was there and so I was meeting him. And so here's what he said to me after he said, "it's pretty good, kid." So anyway, but anyway that was Carter, it was in San Francisco and I remember – remember four things.

And I remember the first thing was that I was at the White House. It was at a big gala, you know. They had the wider, they had all these people from Hollywood there, and Carrie Grant. Okay, so that was at a big place in Los Angeles. But uh, Bush. I also did, is he on there, Bush?

JE: No, but if you say he is.

LM: But when he was–

JE: You mean George W. or?

LM: No, the father,

JE: George H.

LM: Yeah, yeah, I was at the White House, and I did something there for him. Yeah, I should put that on there. Yeah.

JE: But then others too, like Prince, now King Charles.

LM: Oh God.

JE: You sang before him. Yes, tell us.

LM: He came to San Francisco, and I was doing Liu, and you know, backstage. Charles and then his sister died, Princess Anne. Yeah, she was in Australia. So when they all come to the opera and you have to, you know, be anyway, they're gracious people, they know how to treat people.

JE: Did you visit with Prince Charles?

LM: No, they didn't. We didn't visit, we just got to meet him, you know, after the performance. You just visited with them there.

JE: That was before Lady Di.

LM: Yes, it was, we all were young. He was young, he's the same age as me, he's 75. Yeah.

JE: So, and now he has cancer, and he's fighting.

LM: Yes, yes, yes. In other words, you know, we all were young.

JE: Sandra Day O'Connor.

LM: Oh, now that's a special person because she's good friends with Judge Henry. We know. And so, actually, we would trade off rooms at Judge Henry because I would stay there, and she would stay in that room too, sometimes when she was there in his home. We would spend the night. And so he named it Sandra Day O'Connor, which I got a little offended.

But I'll give breath difference. She was, oh, God, what a wonderful lady, what a wonderful soul. What a wonderful soul. I was so privileged to meet her.

JE: And you were privileged to sing before Bishop Desmond Tutu.

LM: Yes, yes, yes.

JE: He was a South African Anglican bishop.

LM: Yes, yes.

JE: And he was the opponent of apartheid, the racial segregation. And where did you sing?

LM: That was at OCU.

JE: At OCU?

LM: And he came and spoke at OCU. Yeah, and I sang. And, yeah, this is all because of Judge Henry. His little goings-on.

JE: He brought him in.

LM: Oh, yes, to speak there. And one of the most moving times was when Judge Henry was being put in that Tenth Circuit. And all of those judges came to Oklahoma. Wow, that was awesome. And I sang the Star Spangled Banner or something. And having all those judges behind you, there's still a lot of them still there on that Tenth Circuit. Matter of fact, he's one of the ones that went to the, he's now a Supreme Court justice. He was in his Tenth Circuit.

JE: Gorsuch? Yes.

LM: Yeah, I met Neil.

JE: Neil Gorsuch.

LM: Oh, yeah, he was his, you know, he was in his circuit, so.

JE: Oh, okay.

LM: Yeah, Judge Henry made sure they all know who I was. Gorsuch. Yep.

Chapter 9 – 6:17
Statue of Liberty

John Erling (JE): Well, you were so used to singing and all, did it ever intimidate you to know that somebody was in the audience that was special?

Leona Mitchell (LM): When I first started and I came to New York, that manager brought me. I had to sing for all of these managers that did Columbia Artist because he was trying to get me to do recitals all over the United States. I was just starting out. And Leontyne was sitting in the audience because I was singing with her ex-husband.

JE: Wow.

LM: I thought I was going to die. At first, I was intimidated because he was there, and I'm singing a duet with him from Porgy and Bess, William Warfield. Then she's sitting there, and I thought I was going to die. I thought I was just going to die. I was 24, and I didn't know what to do.

I remember we were standing after, and I was scared to speak to her. She was waiting on her limo to come pick her up, and I was just shy, shy. She said, "well, hello, dear." And you hadn't met her yet. I hadn't met her yet. No, and I said, "hello, Ms. Bell." I didn't know what to say.

JE: Was that your first meeting ever?

LM: I couldn't. I didn't know what to say to her. I was shaking. I had no words. And then later, she had me to lunch and everything. But I said, "oh, can you imagine what all the things she was feeling as this young girl was singing her music with her husband?" Oh, gosh. That was an experience.

JE: In 1986, you performed with the New York Times. At that time, you played the 10th anniversary of the Statue of Liberty, televised from Central Park and ABC.

LM: Oh, wow. That was a big deal. Because it was the first time the classics had gone all around in the US over the wires of ABC and CBS.

JE: The classics.

LM: Yeah. It was the first time before they did just the regular news stations had it all piped in. That whole thing. Angela Lansbury, we shared a dressing room. She was one of the you know hostess. But it was a really big deal it was such a tribute to our country and the New York Philharmonic was playing gorgeously, and Zubin he, at the last moment, I was doing I remember an aria from butterfly Zubin and I did that in Israel together because I went to Israel many years.

I sang I had oh they, they they Israel became a favorite of the Israeli Philharmonic and they planted 15 trees in honor of my family on land there from the honorable Mitchell and her family. But anyway, Zubin wanted me to come with the Philharmonic in the United States and I was at the Bowl. At the Bowl too when I did this thing, too. It was like the same time of year but with the Philharmonic that was a big deal we all were so excited, matter of fact, I was in Australia and Zubin wanted me to do that so badly and He, we flew on the Concorde when there was the Concorde cause to get me to New York, I flew with Zubin and his wife.

My little baby was sitting in my lap and he was not quite two and Elmer and we all flew to this event. And right immediately after that, Placido was flying to, we couldn't even do anything. And after the performance, I was flying on a plane to Australia again, back to Australia. So it was a busy, busy time, but what a, oh God, it was such an exciting event. It was such an exciting event.

JE: You sang, he's got the whole world in the town.

LM: Yeah, Zubin insisted I, he wanted the blacks to be represented.

JE: The spiritual.

LM: Yeah, he insisted.

JE: But you sang another song too, didn't you?

LM: I did the, from Butterfly, that's what I was doing. And I also did a quartet with Placido and Marilyn Horne. We did the Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, the last movement. So yeah, oh God, that was such an extraordinary time.

JE: Do you ever feel like singing gospel music now?

LM: No, they're too advanced. I love them, I listen all the time. I just love the gospel music, because I came from that. But they are so advanced now. It was more, we're almost like hymns now, than what I did, because they just jumping all around.

JE: Yeah, but the songs you sang back.

LM: Were gospel. The gospel song. But it's more like gospel hymns, because compared to what they do now, it's more.

JE: But I'm talking the traditional songs that you probably.

LM: You mean that are hymns? Yeah, songs.

JE: You don't sing any of that now, do you?

LM: I'm gonna do one, I'm gonna do one. It was from my church, but I do, when I do these things, I do How Great Thou Art, and that one, but I do it with my operatic sound. And the people go berserk, especially How Great Thou Art, I go way up in their stratosphere at the end.

JE: Would there be any label that would be interested in recording you?

LM: It's online, you can hear it, How Great Thou Art. And so just look up How Great Thou Art for Leona Mitchell. This one song that I'm doing in New York, they requested it because they heard it online. And it's from my church, it's one of their church songs called Yes.

All they do is sing Yes. And I'll do that, but it's still semi-classical. I don't just do in that guttural sound.

JE: I think you ought to do an album, a combination.

LM: I hope to, I hope to. You could do some jazz. Yes, I hope to.

JE: You could do some opera. I hope to. You could do some classical, all in one album. It would be wonderful.

LM: That's what we're hoping to do. We're trying to launch this thing, because it's different, it's different. I could have gone to do just a whole classical, but I want to essay this other part, because it's wonderful. I love using that part of my voice. But to still be able to, it's not an easy thing. There's two different techniques.

JE: Between jazz.

LM: Jazz and that, it's two different techniques. So I have to be very careful, but I still can do some of the opera. I wouldn't say I could do, I couldn't go do physically an opera, just physically 75, I just couldn't do that. But I can do some of the arias. And it's exciting when you mix the two. When they hear that other sound, that other sound, and then that whole second half is amazing. I'm doing a lot of Lynette Warren thing, Lynette Warren, I'm sorry, Lynette Cohen. And it's a totally bass voice.

Chapter 10 – 8:00 Across Continents

John Erling (JE): Do you, every morning, da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da.

Leona Mitchell (LM): Well, I'm having to start to, I don't have to do that with that other music. It's just lazy. It's there, it's fine. And it's very comforting because I don't have to worry about anything. But the opera, I'm having to do da, da, da, da, da, because you have to, because the voice is like a sponge. It has to be elasticized and you can't just get up and sing. You cannot.

So it's like a swimmer. You have to get those chords ready, flexible again. So I'm having to da, da, da, da, da. I love, you know, when my son used to look at those cartoons and I think it was, they had the little singers, not singers, but the little actors, and singing opera, they were taking opera lessons. Which cartoon was that? Cinderella. Anyway, the little sisters were taking voice lessons and then they'd go mi-mi-mi-mi-mi. That would kill me.

I would say, oh, that's a voice lesson. Okay. But they were making fun in Disney. I thought that was so funny. They had no talent. Mi-mi-mi-mi-mi.

JE: Oh, yes.

LM: mi-mi-mi-mi-mi.

JE: What did you? What did you drink to soothe your throat? And did you have to sing when you had a cold and all that kind of thing?

LM: Oh, yes. But I was known as a singer that was very consistent. There were a lot of opera singers that got sick a lot, had to cancel. I canceled thousands of performances. I canceled three times in my life where I got so with laryngitis, I couldn't do it. And it was pitiful.

One time I was at the Met out of all of those scenes. They were so furious. It was so steady. But I went over there. I didn't know. I thought sometime I would get that problem and I could work through it. And so I thought I would be able to work through it. I got over there and I couldn't. And it was at the last minute. And so my understudy, they called her. They couldn't find her. And so they had to hold the curtain.

They had never held the curtain but once when somebody died. So they were furious with me because I didn't alert them that I wasn't feeling well. So the great singer now, Deborah Voight, was filling in for me. She came in and finished the AIDA. But that's the only time they had to go out and announce.

But other than that, I took care of myself.

JE: What did you drink? Hot water or what?

LM: No, I drank ice water.

JE: Ice water?

LM: I was not finicky like that. They thought that was horrible, those Europeans. "You drink ice?" When I said "I'm from Oklahoma, I like ice everything. Ice tea." Ice tea. I put ice in Coke. I still do that. But that didn't bother me. No. No, I was not one of those kind of singers. But if I got sick, yeah, I'd take lemon and honey like everybody and try to get rid of whatever.

But I was basically a very secure singer. And my commitments were, well, you know, after a point, I realized they were paying me a lot of money. And I took it seriously. So I took care of myself.

JE: You were on many TV shows, Merv Griffin to Cabot, the Jerry Lewis telethon.

LM: Yes, I was telling you I had to do all these things while you're trying to sing. I remember once I was in Central Park. It was Roberta Flack. She was doing one part of that. It was publicity. And they wanted me to ride around in this horse carriage with my son and just be Leona Mitchell, right?

So they were doing some kind of publicity. It was freezing. I was like freezing to death. And I went, oh, my god. But these were some of the things you had to do for publicity. You know, this is part of the job. And at that time, it was before these, what do we have now? All of the things we have. The toys we have. Now the cell phones and all of that. So it was important about television and being on TV and newspapers.

So I had every country I went to, I had to do an interview. It just, that's just the way. But how wonderful, you know? That was always what I had to do. It was part of the job.

JE: Well, part of it is promoting opera, to get people to try it. And if you try it, you'll like it maybe.

LM: And then you had to be of some, you know, you had to be up there. You weren't going to do an interview if you weren't the star or something.

JE: Right.

LM: So I was privileged. So, I mean, but it became, you know, it was hard to do, but you had to get up and go do those kind of publicity things.

JE: Maybe you've already said, but what was your most favorite opera house? You got a bunch of them, I suppose.

LM: I'll tell you the Sydney Opera, because sitting in my dressing room, I mean, boats were flying by and it was like being on a boat. And just to physically go there made me happy every day. The way it's built, like an airplane. I love that. But to sing in, the Met was lovely to me. I love singing there. And by the way, I went to Buoni Satis for a lot and it was called Little Italy, their house. All the great opera singers went there to sing and it was gorgeous. And the sound was phenomenal. I loved, let's see, that, the Paris Opera, the old Paris Opera.

They have a new one. Oh, gorgeous. It's so gorgeous, that house. I loved being there. I remember one, I did operas there, but one recital. When we're talking, I was, they called me the toast of Paris. I was doing opera there, recitals, symphonies. And the whole audience came down again to my feet. It was like a rock concert. That's how much they loved the concert.

JE: Wow.

LM: That Paris Opera, I sang there a lot. And just to walk up to that house, how it's built is so beautiful. But now they take tours in it now. And all the greats had sung there. So, that was a special one for me.

JE: I don't think there is an Oklahoman today who's left this state and gone into many, as many, many countries and stages as you have.

LM: Yeah, we were everywhere.

JE: I bet I could flat say that.

LM: Yeah, it's not many opera singers that's done it. No. So, I know that, but it's just incredible. I really need to just go back to my books and really put all that down. Because it was amazing. We were just all over the place for 300 days a year. We were just traversing across continents. Just across continents.

Let me tell you one thing Israel did was with the symphony. I was going with the symphony. And Avi was the manager. And it was the first time the Israeli Philharmonic was coming to New York. And they were going to play with the New York Philharmonic. It was going to be the first. And they were doing it in Israel. No. And the New York Philharmonic came to Israel. I was in Australia and Avi wanted me to be there and Zuby wanted me to be there.

So here we go. We had to take a 27 hour flight from... And I was with a baby that was nine months old. I didn't know what I was going to do. I didn't know if that baby would rest. It was a 27 hour non-stop. You know, we had to get off a plane and get on another plane. 13 hours here, 12 hours. Avi, when I got off that plane, I'm going to almost tear up.

But he had a red carpet. He had a red carpet for me to walk on. He appreciated me doing the manager of the symphony. I've never had that done for me.

JE: Coming off a plane?

LM: And flowers all strewn across.

JE: Yeah. And you're tearing up now. That's pretty special.

LM: And man, Elmer and I were trying to stay awake because 24 hours we were all in that other time zone. We could barely stay awake for that, but oh, what a time. What a time.

JE: Is it? Yeah.

LM: I had wonderful times in Israel. It was just, Perlman was, you know, we were friends. It was just a wonderful time. Zubin Mehta was one of my favorite conductors. He was absolutely, he could fill your heart. I just did lots of different kinds of things with him. First time they took opera to the Philharmonic, I did the butterflies with him there. Oh my God, those people went crazy. They used to run an ad of me introducing the Philharmonic with something for me doing butterfly. It was a favorite there.

Chapter 10 – 8:03

How Great Thou Art

John Erling (JE): Did your son get interested as he grew up in opera?

Leona Mitchell (LM): He was, you know, as I said, he was there. And as a matter of fact, there was a concert in Italy with Zubin. We were doing the Verdi Requiem. And my little son, when he was little, he used to conduct. And he would mock Zubin. And Zubin gave him one, he bought him a baton. Zubin gave him a baton. He was in the concert and we were out in the square doing it.

And so when the rousing Verdi Requiem started, my little son got crazy. And he was in my husband's lap. And he, the people started watching him instead of us. So my husband had to take him out of there. We have film of him conducting with his little tails on. And he was just amazing. He could keep those beats. He knew those symphonies. It was amazing. He was two years old.

But yeah, he, and then when he saw me do Butterfly the first time he was in a rehearsal, he was maybe four. And I died. He started crying because he couldn't tell the difference. And he had to take him out. He said, no, "she didn't die, Elmer. She didn't die."

But yeah, oh my God, he's been over immersed into the music.

JE: Have they hosted you here in Tulsa to sing an opera?

LM: Oh, yes.

JE: Many times?

LM: Oh, yes. Many times, right. Yes. I came back and did some of those Verdi operas and it was beyond well received. Yeah. In Tulsa. Yeah.

JE: Oklahoma has honored you in many ways.

LM: Oh, gosh.

JE: They inducted you into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame, Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame, and Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame.

LM: And we have two more. The Women's Hall of Fame and it's the Oklahoma African Hall of Fame. I haven't had a chance to put those in there. Yeah. So they've been so kind to me. So kind to me. How wonderful.

JE: Well, I'm sure that-

LM: Oh, now it's the Pops music too. Oklahoma Pop.

JE: Pop, yes.

LM: So that's another one. The Pop music, yeah.

JE: Okay. Definitely. And I don't know if there's anything you contribute to them as far as memorabilia.

LM: Well, they've done a big interview. They're going to launch it with me.

JE: Have they interviewed you yet?

LM: Oh, yeah.

JE: Another one. Yeah. It's right across from Cain's.

LM: Mm-hmm. I've not been there because we interviewed somewhere else. So whenever they do the big opening, I'll be there. The real opening.

JE: You know, it'd be funny if you did opera in Cain's ballroom where Bob Wills and all those people sang country music. That would be so much funnier.

LM: Oh, God. I love Bob Wills. All right. When I did the Oklahoma Hall of Fame, they were being honored. And so some of those guys, I just adore them. Mm-hmm.

JE: What music did you enjoy listening when you were in high school, even though you were doing opera?

LM: Opera. See, it was gospel mostly for me. Oh. And I had to be in my church and things. But I listened to, I heard Aretha Franklin and all those people. I was listening to all of that. Marvin Gaye. They were becoming really big then, right? In the 60s.

JE: So I'm thinking about Elvis Presley.

LM: Yes. Yes, of course. We heard all of them.

JE: Right. And so you appreciated other music.

LM: Oh, yeah. My dad listened to country western every Saturday because he played guitar.

JE: Oh.

LM: Oh, God. He had all. We had even one of those guitars that are, what do you call it? You strum it?

JE: Autoharp.

LM: Yeah, like that. He had all of that stuff. And he loved listening to the country western on Saturday.

JE: You know why I knew that instrument?

LM: How?

JE: From my church background.

LM: Oh, okay.

JE: Our minister in Grand Forks, North Dakota, Sunday nights, he'd bring out his autoharp.

LM: Okay. So my dad had that too. It was a part of our instruments at home, we had clarinets and we had everything.

JE: You must have some advice for music students of any sort, opera, whatever. What advice do you give to these students?

LM: Oh, gosh. You know, be true to yourself and try to keep, if you can, this is what I've always tried to do. Even though I was amongst all of these people and all over the world, I would try to keep who I am, Leona Mitchell, current in me and be true to myself. And I guess from my religious background, I have compassion and empathy, and I try to put that through my music. And I've been told that I have a healing voice, or whether people sometimes come to performances and they feel better afterwards.

This, to me, means everything to me. And so when you said that to me, when you met me, that meant everything to me because this is – I want to always have that first and foremost. I want you to be. And my teacher, Ms. Inez Silberg, always said that to me, and I've kept it dear. She said, "You have a beautiful voice, but I don't want you to ever sing without your soul and spirit because that's when it's extraordinary."

So that's what I'm. And I think when you are learning, and especially like opera singers, because the technique and things can get difficult, and all of that becomes maybe first, but you should always bring your gift. Because we all are so unique. Each sound is so unique. It's only your sound. So I think you should be true to yourself as far as classical is concerned.

JE: Did your ego, did you have to fight your ego? Because you had every reason to be proud.

LM: But see, I never had, I never, I got, I just wasn't that kind of person. And I've been true to myself. I love that when my family and friend comes to me and they say, You're always Leona. Matter of fact, my concert is called Just Leona in New York.

JE: You're a one-name person.

LM: Just Leona. Mm-hmm. Yeah.

JE: But some singers have soul and some don't.

LM: I know.

JE: And they can do brain, but they can't do heart.

LM: I know. I'm not that kind of person.

JE: It's just that you have soul.

LM: Yeah. I don't. And Inez found it, and she told me about it. And once I learned the technique, then I could put it back in there. I could find that soul. It was very difficult because I was singing totally differently. And I had to learn to shift to this opera. Mm-hmm.

JE: Can I just have you just do a little phrase of a song? It could be...

LM: Anything?

JE: Anything. Okay. Just anything. Just give us something.

LM: Okay. I'm going to do that.

*Oh, Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made*

*Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee
How great Thou art, how great Thou art*

JE: Amen and hallelujah. And I think I'll walk down the sawdust trail and come to the altar.

LM: Come to the altar.

JE: You've seen that before. I know you have. Yeah. That was wonderful.

LM: Mm-hmm.

JE: So then how would you like to be remembered? Your legacy.

LM: Oh, I've been asked that. I've just been asked that. That, you know, from the fields in Oklahoma to the highest places in the world in Oklahoma, you know, I want to be remembered as a person that took this part of my life, put it in my heart in Oklahoma and scaled the heights and kept her soul intact. I don't know.

JE: Yep. Well, that's very good. We should thank Robert Henry on this because he put two of us together.

LM: Yes. And I appreciate you. Yeah. You know, preserving all of us from Oklahoma, us Okies.

JE: Yes.

LM: And getting our stories, how valuable this, what you're doing is. Thank you.

JE: Thank you. This was fun, Leona, and I enjoyed it very much.

LM: Thank you. Me too.

JE: Me too. Thank you. Why do I have tears? I do.

LM: Oh, how sweet! How sweet, John, how sweet.

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