

Oleta Adams

Yakima . . . Kansas City
. . . London . . . Singer logs
a lot of miles en route
to 'overnight success'
on Tears for Fears album

By JOHN ARMATO

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Success for one Yakima native has meant a certain amount of globe-trotting.

More than 10 years ago, Oleta Adams left Yakima, traveling to Kansas City, Mo., to pursue her singing career and make her second home. Two years ago the muse of success beckoned again, leading her to London and a new journey through the elusive world of pop-music fame.

The 1971 Davis High School graduate recently joined the recording ranks of British pop-rockers Tears for Fears. She is featured on their latest album, "The Seeds of Love" and appears extensively in their "Woman in Chains" video. Her first solo album for Phonogram records is due for international release in early 1990 and she is enjoying a starring role in the Tears for Fears world tour.

Adams' move to Kansas City resulted in an impressive reign as the city's favorite nightclub act as well as a multitude of labels.

On one hand, Kansas City writer Shifra Stein described Adams as "all razzle-dazzle." Another writer called her "a Kansas City alto and piano sensation." She's been alternately portrayed as a gospel singer, a rhythm and blues singer, and when convenient for the Kansas City promotions crowd, a jazz artist. She's been compared to everyone from Nancy Wilson to Sammy Davis Jr. And more than one booking agent has told her that her voice wasn't "black" enough.

In a 1977 Kansas City Star interview, Adams cut through the varied attempts to label her. "I don't emulate anybody," she said. "And I don't have to copy anybody. I'm Oleta."

Her attitude is less haughty than focused. Adams has always known she wanted to sing and play music — her music. The daughter of a Baptist preacher in Yakima, Adams was singing in her father's church choir at age 5. By age 9 she was playing piano. At age 11 she was conducting the choir.

In high school, Adams' talents captured the attention of her music teacher, Lee Farrell, who became the 15-year-old's vocal coach and adviser. Farrell has remained Adams'



Davis High School graduate Oleta Adams was pursuing a successful nightclub-singing career in Kansas City, Mo., when the British pop-rock group Tears for Fears discovered her. She sings on the group's new album, "The Seeds of Love," and video, "Woman in Chains."

Profile

manager, costume designer, best friend and confidant.

At age 13, Adams turned down a college scholarship in favor of pursuing her career as a vocalist. Her father was not pleased. "My father prayed for a daughter who could sing and play piano," said Adams in another Star interview. "But what he forgot to do was pray for one that would also stay home." Years later, Adams wrote a song to explain to her father why she had to follow her dream. "I've Got to Sing My Song" is still an oft-requested favorite among Adams fans.

An offer to join the Peggy Fleming tour of "Concert on Ice" as featured singer gave Adams the chance to test her talents on the road, and with dates in Reno, Lake Tahoe, and Vegas, dreams of breaking into the elusive but beckoning big time. To accommodate Phyllis Diller on the same bill in Vegas, the Fleming show was pared down to half its original length. Adams never appeared on stage.

Deeply disappointed, she returned to Washington and focused on playing small clubs. She was making a reasonable but frustrated living when a Westin food and beverage manager saw her perform in Seattle. He suggested she try Kansas City.

Adams played the Signboard Bar for the first time in 1975. Eventually Kansas City became her home and she spent a decade fulfilling unusually long and successful contracts at Crown Center, the Hyatt Regency and the Alameda Hotel. Fans waited in lines spilling down staircases and winding through lobbies to spend an hour or two with Adams. Rooms consistently sold out.

An Oleta Adams performance was a sophisticated show by a consummate enter-

tainer. Even when drunken conventioners demanded "New York, New York" for the sixth time in one night, Adams made it sound fresh, even fun. An eclectic mix of pop favorites, standards, show tunes and original compositions made Adams hard to classify but popular. Her ability to orchestrate for piano, bass and drums was remarkable. Thick layers of music tucked each listener in for the evening.

Between contracts, she recorded two albums, toured other parts of the country and did an extended solo tour of Europe. Summarized, it sounds like a whirlwind of glamour. In reality, Adams was routinely frustrated by the hollow promises that characterize the music industry. Luminaries of popular music checked in and out Kansas City's hotels weekly. Many were impressed with Adams. Some said "call me." Some said "I'll have my people call you." Mostly, nothing happened.

It was, therefore, a reserved Adams that met with Roland Orzabal and Curt Smith of Tears for Fears. They had heard Adams when their "Songs from the Big Chair" tour stopped in Kansas City in 1985. "She got to me," Orzabal recalled in a recent interview with Britain's Melody Maker magazine, "and, for me, if music can open you up and reduce you to tears, then it's doing its job. I thought she was one of the best singers I'd ever heard."

In 1987 the tearful twosome visited the states again, this time for the sole purpose of getting acquainted with Oleta Adams. For three days the trio talked, and shopped for each other's albums. After Orzabal and Smith adjourned to England, Adams passed the time waiting, negotiating, waiting some more, signing contracts, and waiting again. Finally, in February 1988, Adams was flown to London to record what has become a top 25 album in the United States. It entered the British charts at number one.

Adams' contributions were significant. She graces the album's second single, "Woman in Chains," with a hauntingly rich and relaxed vocal debut, and is responsible for the tasteful piano highlights in "Standing on the Corner of the World." It is, however, the demanding "Badman's Song" that reveals her power. She fires the rhythm section with ferocious handfuls of chords, clustered and scooped from all parts of the keyboard. Her vocals have the urgency and soulful stretch that a piece possessed of such passion requires. In fact, Orzabal and Smith use the liner notes to thank Adams for "authenticating our soul."

In a recent Rolling Stone interview, Adams responded to the credit with characteristic poise. "That was sweet, but they have an awful lot of soul of their own," she said. "They just needed to find another way to express it. I got a chance to help a bit."

No doubt newcomers to the Adams family of fans will be thrilled to discover this new "overnight" sensation. In truth, the night lasted thirty-some intense but rewarding years. The days ahead will escort Adams through the maze-like sound and fury of growing success.

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