

Renowned jazz musician was consummate entertainer

By [Lynnette Hintze / Daily Inter Lake](#)

| March 1, 2017 4:00 AM



Nina Russell, left, is pictured in a photograph to advertise her 1950 jazz concert at the Cadillac Hotel in Whitefish with pianist Marie Jordan. Russell performed on organ and piano and was a long-time visitor and performer in the Flathead Valley before moving here later in life.

Nina Russell loved to tell the story of how she first met legendary jazz pianist Duke Ellington at a Chicago nightclub.

She regaled Inter Lake staffer Stu Watson with that encounter during a 1975 interview. While waiting for her girlfriends to arrive at the Platinum Lounge, Russell was playing a few tunes on the organ when a man approached her and offered to buy her a drink.

“You play very well,” he said. Then he played a few tunes, including several classic Duke Ellington tunes.

“It sounds all right,” Russell told the mystery pianist, “but you haven’t been playing the chords right.”

When Russell’s girlfriends arrived and exclaimed, “Why Duke, when did you get here?” Russell said she almost fainted when she realized the pianist was THE Duke Ellington.

“Nina was a great storyteller and these tales of the jazz life in major cities endeared her to local fans,” said Mark Holston, a longtime member of the Cocinando Latin Jazz Orchestra. “As a singer, she had a marvelous voice — deep and rich, a kind of synthesis of such vocalists as Betty Carter and Ella Fitzgerald.”

Russell — a jazz legend in her own right — traveled America from coast to coast, packing her Hammond organ with her for gigs that ranged from Chicago nightclubs run by mobsters to jam sessions with Nat “King” Cole and Louis Armstrong.

She loved making music. She also loved Montana.

When her husband, “Big Bill” Russell died in 1971, she wasted little time before settling in Hungry Horse, where the couple years earlier had paid \$80 to cover the back taxes for two town lots that had been in foreclosure. From that point on the Flathead Valley was home.

In 2000, three years before she died a day shy of her 92nd birthday, the Montana Arts Council honored Russell, declaring her a “Montana Living Treasure.”

Those who had the pleasure of hearing Russell play and sing through the years say she was an unforgettable, larger-than-life character. She often wore wigs and over-the-top hats, and dressed to the nines for her performances.

For many years she was a regular at Tiebucker’s in Somers, where she played on a grand piano in traditional piano-bar style, with patrons sitting around the curve of the piano, recalled bass player Pete Hand, who played with Russell at the Somers restaurant.

“We did that a couple nights a week for several years,” Hand recalled. “She had a lot of these novelty songs, and she played the common jazz tunes of her day. She was fun to listen to, a real character.”

Hand also remembers jamming with Russell at her Hungry Horse home in the mid-1980s. “I would go over to her place and I’d dig up songs I wanted to play, and we would play.”

Russell’s life was a palette of color from the get-go.

Born into a musical family, Russell began taking piano lessons at age 7, following in the footsteps of her mother and grandmother, who both had college degrees in piano and organ.

“I made a practical choice to do secretarial work, but was continually drawn back to the musical world,” she told the Inter Lake during a 2000 interview.

Her talent on the piano and organ, as well as singing, kept her in demand. Soon she was rubbing elbows with gangsters, movie stars, opera singers, jazz legends, astronauts and the proverbial jet-set crowd as she performed around the country.

She lived in Washington, D.C., and Indiana before settling in Chicago. Later she played in Las Vegas for four years and in West Coast clubs while living in Los Angeles.

Her father, Angus Hays, arrived in Montana in 1891 as a member of the U.S. Army’s 25th Infantry, a Negro cavalry unit whose duty was to help protect settlers from the Indians who dubbed the black men “Buffalo Soldiers” for their dark skin and brown coats. The Buffalo Soldiers had even been briefly deployed in Demersville north of Flathead Lake, although whether Hays was there is not known.

A North Carolina native, Russell remembered her father’s stories of Montana, and when she arrived in Big Sky Country at age 40, she found it captivating. She and her husband bought land in Hungry Horse in the 1950s and vacationed in the Flathead.

She performed locally from time to time before moving to Hungry Horse permanently in 1972. A 1950 Daily Inter Lake advertisement for The Cadillac Rainbow Lounge in Whitefish noted Russell and Marie Jordan, a “colored duo,” as the lounge’s “finest yet” attraction, with Russell playing the organ and Jordan the piano.

There also were many gigs at the Rocco Club in Hungry Horse, a popular nightclub/restaurant started when the dam was being built. She played there occasionally in the 1950s and became a regular at the club when she moved to Hungry Horse in the ’70s.

In the late 1990s Russell was diagnosed with leukemia, and though she struggled with the illness, she kept on playing. She confided to the Inter Lake in 2000, “I’m slower than I was, and I look horrid. The worse I look, the better I feel.”

She did some painting in her golden years, preferring watercolors. And even while battling cancer she practiced the organ daily.

“I’m still drinking Scotch and smoking my cigarettes,” she told the Inter Lake in 2000. “And I am amazed I was kissed by a man (Eugene Cernan) who walked on the moon.”