

A Frightening Experience

By Fred Hobbs

A frightening experience doesn't necessarily have to involve the image of ghosts, turbulence on a jet liner, a ride on a roller coaster or even a Frankenstein movie. This is not a tale which starts on a dark and stormy night in a haunted castle on the moors. But it does involve the dark ... pitch black dark.

It happened right here in Denver. I was a young radio announcer/disc jockey. As such, I frequently had the opportunity to interview visiting celebrities including the likes of John Wayne, Angie Dickinson; Cliff Robertson, Sir Edmund Hillary, Edmund Hillary, Victor Borge and so I was supposedly used to being with celebrities, but enough of this unwarranted exercise in narcissism. On with the story.

In addition to those interview sessions, occasionally I was called upon to emcee a live appearance by musical artists of the day ... the day being collectively the 1960s. Folk music was all the rage then. I was asked to introduce the performers at a special show sponsored by the radio station ... Gene Amole's KDEN. Now, by then I was accustomed to the mike, but still pretty uncomfortable in front of a live audience. Not exactly a frightening experience for me, but the prospect of which did result in a few butterflies flitting around in my tummy.

This particular folk music show, to be held at the old City Auditorium, now the Ellie Calkins Opera house, was to feature the very popular Kingston Trio of "Tom Dooley" fame and the Grammy-award winning South African singer and civil rights activist, Miriam Makeba. I prepared my ad-libs (a common joke among us radio folk.) In other words, I studied the careers of both the Kingston's and Ms. Makeba, prepared to give them a suitable Denver welcome and introduction without using a script. What I didn't anticipate or check out ahead of time, was the layout of the stage. And that brings us closer to the frightening part of this tale.

It happened that a new car show was being held in the large space at the rear of the stage. A black curtain hid the display of cars from the view of the audience in the theater seats. The space in front of the curtain was narrow, but adequate for the two acts ... Ms. Makeba a soloist and the trio, and for a microphone and slightly nervous master of ceremonies.

Miriam Makeba was first on the bill. I took to the mike and began describing the fact that she was the first artist to popularize African music in the United States; that she recorded and toured with many popular artists including Harry Belafonte and Paul Simon. That she even sang for the birthday party of President John F. Kennedy at Madison Square Garden. (I was careful not to mention another performer who sang "Happy Birthday" to JFK, the famous performance by Marilyn Monroe.) I ended my introduction in a suitably up tempo voice declaring: "Ladies and Gentlemen, KDEN proudly presents Miriam Makeba."

I stood away from her and applauded with the audience as she took her place in front of the microphone. As I turned to exit behind the curtain, all the lights went out save for a tiny spot light on Ms Makeba's nose which gradually broadened a bit to show only her face. The rest of the hall was in total darkness.

In an attempt to exit gracefully, I felt in vain for an opening in the curtain. Feeling my way along the curtain briefly, I began to lose my grip and with it my sense of direction. Just as Ms. Makeba was into the first notes of her song, I began to be fearful of not finding my way off stage ever. But no problem with that. The next moment, amid a clatter of chairs and music stands, I found myself on the floor of the empty orchestra pit.

It was truly painful. Fortunately no broken bones, but at that moment, I might have traded a bone or two for the embarrassment and humiliation of this unscheduled and unwanted performance. What happened next was even worse. Evidently concerned for my welfare, the spotlight operator turned away from Ms. Makeba's nose and shined his light on the orchestra pit so I could see to scramble out or perhaps prepare to be attended by a physician in the audience. Fortunately, it was the former. I was, as we say, "okay".

Unfortunately, Ms, Makeba was not okay. She shot a withering glance at me and started her song over. The humiliation was palpable. I slithered back stage rubbing my arm and my rear to try to ease the pain. Of course, the show must go on. So, the offended singing star finished her gig, took a quick bow acknowledging the crowd's applause and hurried off stage brushing me aside as I was about to try to apologize.

Meantime, I had more work to do. I strode...no, let's be accurate, I kind of limped back on stage careful to stay away from the edge, to introduce the Kingston Trio. And you know, for me, that frightening experience turned out to be more than just okay. As I approached the mike again, the audience began to rise and as incredible as it may seem, they gave me a standing ovation!