

# IT'S MILLER TIME!

~Stacy Davies  
specialty dj



Claremont prides itself on its cultural elitism: The Colleges, The Village, the fact that it's not Pomona. But skimming along on the underbelly of the hoighty-toighty facade is a story of a camp legend—a woman who defied the times she lived in, who became a momentary bridge between two conflicting generations. A woman whose disappearance from Claremont history is as suspicious as the DaVinci Code.

Elva Ruby Miller moved to the lethargic desert town of Claremont with her husband in 1935. For 30 years, Mrs. Miller kept house, meticulously tended the garden, and she sang—much to her friends' chagrin. But Mrs. Miller didn't give a hoot. She had been in her high school glee club, and was a member of the Foothill Drama and Choral Society. And even though the choir of the First Presbyterian Church didn't want her heavy vocal stylings, the 50ish matronly housewife enrolled in Pomona College in the 1960s and studied voice for seven years with little hippie kids. It was there that a student pianist named Fred Bock prompted Mrs. Miller to try her hand at popular rock tunes of the day. She began recording them, just for fun, at rented studios in Claremont and El Monte, but Bock had a connection to Capital Records, and soon convinced the studio to listen to her.

Warbling her classically trained soprano through hits of the day such as Petula Clark's "Downtown" (in which Mrs. Miller often whistled, because she forgot the words), "Hard Day's Night," and "Chim Chim Cher-ee," she released her first album, *Mrs. Miller's Greatest Hits* in 1966. A few LA DJs had already begun playing her version of "Blue Velvet"—sent to them by Bock—and her debut album sold out all 50,000 copies in the first 48 hours of its pressing, and 250,000 in three weeks. Radio stations dubbed her "the toast of Claremont," and she was written up in *Time Magazine*, *Life*, and the *LA Times*. The merry-go-round had begun.

Clad in her signature pink recital gown and sounding, as one reviewer put it, "like a tubercular parrot," Mrs. Miller, soon played packed houses at the Coconut Grove and the Royal Tahitian, and made appearances on "The Johnny Carson Show," "Laugh-In," and "Art Linkletter's House Party." Her crowing moment, however, was a spot on "The Ed Sullivan Show"—where she received a telegram of congratulations from Elvis Presley and hung out backstage chatting with Nancy Sinatra, whose "Boots" song Mrs. Miller had covered on her album.

Of course, not everyone understood the Miller sound—not even Elva Miller. Mrs. Miller took her music seriously, and didn't pick up on the "it's so bad it's good" gag until about a year later. One of the few adults in the late 60s to harbor serious



affection for the youth culture, Mrs. Miller didn't mind the laughter, but she worried that the kids

of the turbulent sixties would think she was intentionally making fun of their music. They didn't—perhaps it was as Elva Miller had hoped: "I think they are very much in need of a grandmother right now." They were certainly surprised that a grandmother was in need of them.

Enveloped in her kinship with young people, Mrs. Miller also headed off to Vietnam with the USO for a brief stint entertaining the troops. Donning jungle boots and a muu-muu, she sang and chatted about the 15 years she'd spent studying music—to uproarious laughter. She quickly amended her statement, lopping off several years each time they laughed, finally ending up with, "would you believe *one* year?" She eventually "confessed" that she was starting singing lessons the next day.

Elva Miller released three more albums, *Will Success Spoil Mrs. Miller?*, *The Country Soul of Mrs. Miller*, and *Mrs. Miller Does Her Thing*—a more distorted psychedelic Mrs. Miller, featuring the songs, "Renaissance of Smut," "Granny Bopper," and the dope song, "Mary Jane," which later became the theme of a film of the same name starring Fabian, Patty McCormick (*The Bad Seed*) and a young Teri Garr. She also appeared in the 1967 film *The Cool Ones* with Roddy McDowell. After her last album, however, Mrs. Miller felt the record execs had turned her into a late sixties drug icon, or as she put it, "some kind of kook," and with record sales lagging, in the early 1970s, she threw in the towel.

Mrs. Miller formed her own record label, Vibrato Records, but released only two classical music singles to little fanfare, and officially retired in 1973. After the death of her husband, Elva Miller moved to Los Angeles, where she was frequently seen at the LA Music Center taking in a classical music performance. Even though her spotlight lasted for only two years, it didn't faze Mrs. Miller. "I belonged in opera," she said. "I wanted to do ballads, but they wouldn't let me. But it's wonderful to be a part of the world—not just one person, as I was as a housewife. I've had a great deal of fun and met lots of people. Not many women my age have such an opportunity." Mrs. Miller passed away in 1997 at the age of 90. She is interred at the Pomona Mausoleum, near her beloved Claremont, if you'd like to pay her a much deserved visit. 🎵

