



Wisconsin Singers Alumni Spotlight on Cheryl Baxter



For over four decades, Wisconsin Singers alum Cheryl Baxter has been a triple threat in the Los Angeles entertainment industry, singing, dancing, and acting her way onto stages across the world. "I kinda get bored if I do one thing!" she says.

But although she's spent most of her life performing, teaching, choreographing, and directing, she likely didn't expect that 2021 would be the year she performed as a backup dancer on the Grammy Awards alongside her best friend of 43 years. Or that a comment from Grammy host Trevor Noah would prompt Cheryl's son, R5 drummer Ellington Ratliff, to urge her to create a TikTok account with her friend. Or that their first TikTok would amass over 1.1 million views. But that's what happens when raw talent, hard work, and non-stop enthusiasm collide.

As the child of a dance teacher, Cheryl made her foray into the performance world at a young age. And neither daughter nor mother – who is currently 91 – has stopped dancing since. Next year, her mother is preparing to celebrate the 75th anniversary of her studio, The Betty Hayes School of Dance in Avoca, WI, which she opened as a teenager in 1947.

Cheryl's mother isn't the only family member with a career in the arts. While dancing in the musical *Sophisticated Ladies* in the early 80s, Cheryl fell in love with actor George Ratliff, and the two have been together ever since. Over the years, they collaborated on countless projects, including a long stint as a director/choreographer team for Universal Studios in Hollywood and Japan.

Together, they have a 28-year-old son named Ellington, who followed his parents into the limelight. While he grew up singing and dancing, he soon picked up the drums. From 2009 through 2018, Ellington toured the world with Disney Channel star Ross Lynch and Ross's three siblings as the drummer of the pop rock group R5.

Ellington has three half-brothers (Erick, Elden, and Garette Henson) from his father's previous marriage, who have found success in the entertainment industry as well. Elden has enjoyed the most time in the spotlight, starring in roles such as Fulton Reed in *The Mighty Ducks* trilogy, Foggy Nelson in the Netflix show *Daredevil*, and Pollux in *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Parts 1 and 2*.

With COVID-19 wreaking havoc on the arts world, one might expect the pace to have slowed down for Cheryl's family this past year. However, life seemed to accelerate. As a member of the dance faculty at three colleges, Cheryl had to construct a makeshift home studio and master teaching through Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Canvas in the course of a week. Her son Ellington felt life speed up as well – when a legendary mixer/producer couldn't travel to London due to COVID-19 restrictions, he worked on Ellington's music instead, culminating in the release of Ellington's debut EP this spring.

Still, the family missed the stage. Earlier this month, Cheryl and her husband finally returned to the theater to direct and choreograph *Shrek the Musical, Jr.* at The Rubicon in Ventura, CA. As they rehearsed with and mentored young, budding actors and actresses who had been away from the stage for far too long, the arts finally "felt magical again."

Cheryl's most memorable experience on stage during the past year came somewhat unexpectedly, however. One Sunday morning in early March, her agent called her up. "She said, 'Cheryl, I have a job for you.' I said, 'Is it the Grammys?'" While Cheryl knew rapper DaBaby was seeking gray-haired backup dancers for his performance (her friend Beth had already been chosen), she had counted herself out because she did not, in fact, have gray hair. However, when one of the dancers missed her required COVID test, Cheryl was called.

Although she'd danced on many awards shows, this was Cheryl's first time on the Grammys – and her first experience rehearsing and taping a high-profile performance in the COVID era. Daily COVID tests were mandated, and masks were required during rehearsal. The dancers, robed in black, had to stay six feet apart. At one point during the rehearsals, one of DaBaby's many heavy, expensive rings flew off his hand and hit Cheryl in the leg. Forgetting COVID precautions she instinctively picked it up, and for a second considered running off to an island with it. Instead, she reluctantly gave it back to its rightful owner. While there was no live audience apart from fellow performers such as Dua Lipa and Bad Bunny, the director kept the performers' hearts pumping. "All right, this is the one we're keeping, this is the one millions will be watching on Sunday night!"

She expected her connection with the name DaBaby to be done after the performance. And when Grammy host Trevor Noah creatively addressed the robed choir as "DaBaby Boomers," she didn't think anything of it. But her son Ellington had a better idea. "Mom, you guys have to get a TikTok. You need to be DaBaby Boomers." So, riding the media frenzy by reprising their Grammy roles, the pair's first TikTok eclipsed 1.1 million views, and the next chapter of Cheryl's career sprang to life.

Now, Cheryl gets together with her best friend Beth frequently to record a few TikToks, posting them every two days. They never know which will take off – while some sit dormant, others quickly jump to thousands of views. But that surprise is just part of the fun.

Looking back over her career, Cheryl has some words of advice for young performers: "Don't pigeonhole yourself into one thing." Growing up she always thought of herself as a dancer, so she will be forever grateful to the Wisconsin Singers program for equipping her with excellent vocal training. Alongside the incredible vocalists of the 1977-1978 troupe, Cheryl gained skills that allowed her to audition – and be chosen – for roles she never would have earned as just a dancer.

Never stop learning, because skills gained in the arts will transfer to any profession, Cheryl says. One of her students recently told her he wants to become a sportscaster – with the big, booming voice he found onstage. Cheryl firmly believes "the opportunities are endless if you don't limit yourself." And, with her 100,000+ followers and 13+ million views on TikTok, it's quite clear that her words ring true.

