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Biracial singer Lyndee Mah finds a sense of place in performance memoir 'E'-Bon, E'-Bon'

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Life wasn't always easy for Lyndee Mah, the half-Chinese, half-white singer from southeast Idaho. Her story is marked by a search for identity and a place in the world, but her struggle has forced her to forge her own path -- a path that has now led to a multimedia autobiographical performance, "E'-Bon, E'-Bon."

Mah's upcoming show, much like herself, is many different things. She calls it an "American immigration story," told through a "multimedia musicale-memoir." It's complicated, comical and at times a bit scary. After spending the better part of a year researching her heritage and looking back at her life, Mah will tell her story through a documentary, introduced and interspersed with her own unique vocal performance -- backed by famed Portland pianist Janice Scroggins.

Piecing it all together wasn't a simple process. "When you do get to create [something], finding how to describe it is part of that whole process," she said. She decided to start, as so many do, at the beginning.

Mah's father was born in a small village in China. He immigrated to America with his wife, where the two raised their children in Idaho Falls, Idaho. His wife died young, forcing him to seek out childcare at their local Salvation Army. There he met Mah's mother, a white woman with Welsh heritage, who was immediately taken with the family. The two married, at a time when interracial marriage was still illegal in many places, and in 1958 Lyndee was born.

From an early age Lyndee struggled to fit in. "As a young girl it wasn't really based on my race," she said. But it was hard for her to escape her racial identity, a troubling sentiment she recalls in a song, "Growing up in Idaho, nobody looked like me, not even in my family."

At 8 years old, the situation became dire when a Korean War veteran saw her and had a flashback, suddenly turning on her with homicidal intent. "It sounds extreme," she said. "It was extreme."

As an adult, she learned to forge her own path through life, fighting through collegiate music programs that balked at a biracial woman trying to sing jazz and a world that didn't seek her out for anything. "I understand who I am," Mah said. "I'm unique. I come into the world in a different pair of shoes."

Ultimately, she said, the closest groups people have are their families. Her own family is a racial melting pot; her son is Chinese, European and African American. Through all her struggles, she said she knew her family would always be there for her.

A few months ago, as she searched for a place to host the show she feared would never see the light of day, she heard about The Sanctuary, a venue in Northeast Portland. She was a little skeptical at first, but when she got there she felt a connection. As it turns out, The Sanctuary is in the old Portland Salvation Army headquarters -- a serendipitous turn of events that leads her back to her origins.

"E'-Bon, E'Bon" is a chance for her to tell where she comes from, how her heritage has shaped her and how she's refused to fit into anybody's boxes, all through film and her primary art of music. "I've settled with: I can be in your group, and I can be in that group over there, and I can be in that group over there, and I can be in that group over there, but I just gotta be me," Mah said. "And of course I sing that song too!"