

Della Reese Biography

Della Reese is a name that is synonymous with entertainment par excellence. Her singing style on romantic ballads or hard-driving songs utilizes her unique blend of jazz-blues-gospel textures and phrases and makes for a sound that is unmistakable Della Reese.

She can be surrounded by a groovy quartet or a lush philharmonic orchestra, yet her unmatched qualities as a stylist keep you always aware ... "Man, that's Della singing."

Della's singing captivated audiences from clubs to stages and led to her first exposure on television, where she appeared on all the musical variety shows.

Surprisingly to many, but not to herself, Della soon displayed excellent comedic and dramatic skills. To quote Della: "If you can make people believe your songs of blues and sadness, when you don't feel that way ... well, that takes acting ability, I always knew I had."

And for over twenty years that ability has given viewers great pleasure in the many roles she has played on television. Her most recent has been as costar in the CBS dramatic series "Touch By an Angel."

Della, who was born Deloreese Patricia Early in Detroit, Michigan, began singing in church when she was 6 years old. Throughout her formative years, she was involved in gospel singing, and at 13, Della was hired by the late Mahalia Jackson to sing with her group.

As Della recalls, "This opportunity to sing with the world's foremost gospel singer was a thrilling experience. I will never forget the wonderful association which lasted for three consecutive summers, and the lasting things I learned from her ... how to communicate with People through song." (A lesson that Della has evolved into an art form.)

Later, while majoring in psychology at Wayne State University, in Detroit, Della formed her own female gospel group, "The Meditation Singers," which is listed in the "Who's Who of Gospel Music."

However, the passing of her mother and her father's serious illness caused her to interrupt her schooling, in order to find a job to help support the family. This brought about a number of jobs, ranging from clerical, to barbering, to truck driving, to taxi driving. Her break came when she was hostessing and singing at Detroit's famed "Flame Showbar."

While her roots were still in gospel music, Della was now being exposed to the talents and styles of such music greats as Ella Fitzgerald, Dinah Washington, Sarah Vaughn, Billie Holiday, Al Hibbler, Billy Eckstine, and others. Della, in turn, developed an individual style that was her springboard to national prominence.

In 1953, she made the move to New York City and became a vocalist with the Erskine Hawkins orchestra, and shortly thereafter, signed a recording contract with Jubilee Records. Her first records included "In The Still of The Night," "I've Got My Love To Keep Me Warm" and "Time After Time."

Della had her first major hit with "And That Reminds me (of you)." That same year, she was voted "The Most Promising Singer" by Billboard, Cashbox, and Variety, as well as The Disc Jockeys of America and the Jukebox Operators Association.

Della signed a new recording contract in 1959, with RCA, and subsequently enjoyed her biggest hit, a tune adapted from Puccini's "La Boheme," entitled "Don't You Know." Acknowledgement from the music industry followed as she was nominated for a Grammy as best female vocalist. This led to Della performing for the next nine years in Las Vegas on the Strip.

In the thirty years that followed "Don't You Know," Della Reese has continued her string of recordings, with her most recent being the cast album "Some Of My Best Friends Are The Blue" from the very successful blues review conceived and written for her by her husband/producer Franklin Lett.

Prior to that, Della had conceived and produced her own album "Sure Like Lovin' You," which offers a cross-section of her musical talents: standard ballads, blues, calypso, and contemporary pop. Many of these songs were written by Della. However, her latest recording accolade was in the gospel field, where she was nominated in 1987 for a Grammy as "The Best Female Soloist in Gospel."

A generous amount of television exposure followed Della's first recording successes. In the late 50's and early 60's, she appeared on many television shows, including "The Perry Como Show," "The Jackie Gleason Show," as well as more than twenty appearances on "The Ed Sullivan Show." She was the first female to host "The Tonight Show."

She was soon asked to host her own talk show, "Della," (making her the first black woman to host her own show) which was syndicated nationally by RKO in 1969 and '70. Today, she is a regular guest star on various series, and recently completed her own series.

Della followed her talk show with a number of television appearances in comedic and dramatic roles. She guest starred in such early shows as "Sanford and Son," "Police Story," and then starred in two series pilots "Twice In A Lifetime" (with Ernest Borgnine), which aired as a MOW, and "Flo's Place."

A guest appearance on "Chico and the Man" was so well received that the producers offered her a full-time role the following season.

Television, which became the major medium of the '70's and the '80's, saw a lot of Della. Her singing talents were highlighted on such shows as "The Love Boat" Special, "The Great American Gospel Show," "The Grand Ol' Opry," "The Story of Amazing Grace," "Della Reese and Woody Herman" and "The Christmas Special with Mel Torme and Della Reese".

Her comedic talents were seen on the likes of "It Takes Two" (ABC), "Crazy Like a Fox" (CBS), "Charlie & Company" (CBS), and "Night Court" (NBC), her own series with Redd Foxx, "The Royal Family" (CBS), appearances on "Designing Women" and "227."

Della showed us more of her action and dramatic talents in the television shows, "A-Team" (NBC), "Young Riders" (ABC), "MacGyver" (ABC), "L.A. Law," "Picket Fences" and "Nightmare in Badham County," for which she was nominated for an Emmy.

The most recent of her television pursuits is the CBS dramatic series, "Touched By An Angel" where her two talents are combined as she also sings the theme song.

Della's television work was honored in 1994, as she received her star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

However, the epitome of her action talents were seen in the movie "Harlem Nights" by Eddie Murphy, in which she and Eddie had one of the greatest fight scenes in modern movies.

Enjoying what free time she has at home, Della is now spending more time working on one of her other talents, songwriting. Not only does she write songs for herself, but for other performers as well.

Della Reese certainly has not given up her first love, singing. She still performs in concert halls, nightclubs, and music festivals, in between tapings of television shows. More and more, she is being asked to perform with symphony orchestras, with unanimous acclaim from critics and audiences alike.

Two of her favorite venues to perform in are at festivals/fairs and nightclubs. As Della says, "the intimacy between me and a-nightclub audience is unmatched, for we become as one, while on the other hand, the

combination of being outdoors and the surging crowds, creates such an excitement in me that it makes me want to give more and more of myself."

Those words are echoed by her audiences..... MORE!MORE!MORE!