

# "The Angel from Detroit"

## The Story of Della Reese & The Meditation Singers of Detroit

### Part One (1931-1969) The Show Bar Years

BY OPAL LOUIS NATIONS

**A**retha Franklin, Joe Louis, Diana Ross and Magic Johnson all hail from the Wolverine State but no "greats" list would be complete without the inclusion of Della Reese, singer, actress, minister, hostess and formidable all-round veteran black entertainer and survivor. Reese is a star described on A & E's Biography profile ("Outspoken Angel") as a woman who sang her way out of the slums of Detroit into a career that has spanned more than sixty years, culminating in the high-rated TV sitcom part of "Tess" (alongside Roma Downey and John Dye) on CBS's "Touched by an Angel," now in its eighth season.

Born Deloreese Patricia Early on July 6, 1931 on Detroit's East Side, Della began singing in local church choirs when she was six. In a recent article in the *San Francisco Chronicle Parade Magazine*, Della told reporter Dotson Rader that "My mother, father and me lived right smack-dab on the edge of Black Bottom. There you could get whatever you wanted-whores, drugs or hired-killing - so it overflowed into my life." Three of Della's sisters (Cladys, Nodie and Susan) were prostitutes and drunks. Somehow she knew that her entry into the tough East Side environment was just a springboard to whatever fate or fortunes lay ahead. She knew in her heart she would find a way out.

Her mother, Nellie, was a housekeeper. Her father, Richard Early, was a steelworker. She has four half-sisters and a half-brother from her mother's previous two marriages. The Earlys, living on the edge of poverty, were often forced to take in borders. Nellie, a good, hard-working Christian woman, gave Della the hope and encouragement to find a way to a better life. By her thirteenth birthday Della was conducting the youth choir at Detroit's Church of Our Faith. At that time, gospel diva Mahalia Jackson and her touring company came to give a concert at Della's church. After hearing Della solo with the choir Mahalia asked Della to tour with her in place of a singer in her group who had become pregnant. Mahalia's grace and majestic approach to her music influenced Della no end. She, too, wanted to share that kind of warmth and vibrancy in her church.

All photos courtesy of Lett Entertainment



The "lovingly" Della (above)



Della on one hour special "Travelin'" starring Roger Miller



Della toured with Mahalia for three summers, during which time she experienced for the first time the hatred and bigotry so widespread in the South. In 1942 Detroit itself suffered its own race riots. The city was transformed into a war zone for two days, leaving thirty-four people killed and six hundred injured. One of the dead included Della's cousin Junior. At various times, Della also sat in with Philadelphia's famous Ward Singers and Chicago's Roberta Martin Singers, according to Portia K. Moultsby in her essay entitled "The Impact of Gospel Music" as part of Bernice Johnson Reagon's book *We'll Understand It Better By & By* (Smithsonian Press, 1992).

After attending various local high schools, Della elected to study psychology at Wayne State University. "My mother died when I was in my freshman year," says Della. Quitting school to help out her father and financially support the family, Della returned home. But tensions flared between Della and her ill father, and at seventeen years of age she ran away. "I had to support myself," says Della. "I took on a series of jobs. First I did clerical work, barbering and truck driving. Then I drove a cab. During all this I still managed to find time to sing in church. Eventually I wound up in a hostess job at the Oriole Bowling Alley Lounge."

Meanwhile, during Della's freshman year, a powerhouse group of female singers came together, calling themselves, The Meditations. The "shout-gospel" Meditations became Detroit's answer to Chicago's Caravans and Philadelphia's Davis Sisters. Original soldiers in the group were plucked from the Voices of Meditation Choir (hence the evolution of the name) of the New Liberty Baptist Church in Detroit by lead soprano Earnestine Rundless. Earnestine was born in Mount Bayou, Mississippi and raised in the Windy City. In Chicago she went out to see her gospel idols, the Soul Stirrers, then based in Texas.

Lead singing in the Soul Stirrers was then handled by Edward R. Rundless. Earnestine and Edward took a shine to each other and were married. After taking up the ministry, Edward and his wife moved to Detroit where Edward was called to pastor the New Liberty Baptist. Earnestine came from a background of singing in various choirs and possessed a strong, "rough" voice. The Meditations enjoyed a weekly Sunday radio broadcast called The Moments of Meditation. The octet formed from the choir included Earnestine - lead, soprano Lilian Mitchell, plus Della and her sister Marie Waters, who sang second lead and alto respectively. Other soloists took Della's place now and again. One of these was possibly Carrie Williams who served when Della was playing in nightclubs. Della thinks that Laura Lee might have stepped in.

The Meditations' reputation grew, and they started going out to perform beyond Detroit. As most members had family responsibilities and limited means of transportation, the Meditations found it difficult to fill concert dates that took them away from home longer than an extended weekend.

While working at the Oriole, Della was noticed by Al Green, manager of Morris Wasserman's Flame Show Bar at the corner of Canfield and John R. Streets. The Flame was Detroit's equivalent of New York's Apollo Theatre. Topflight entertainers like Billie Holiday, Billy Eckstine, Count Basie, Nat King Cole and Dinah Washington played there. The Flame was like finishing school for promising, young, fledgling high soprano Della. Visiting artists such as Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughn had a profound influence on her and helped her find her own way of putting over a song. Della also knew that she would not make much money singing gospel in her spare time with the Meditations.

In her 1982 interview with Portia K. Maultby, Della expressed her needs as including a comfortable apartment, a healthy bank account and some good, solid real estate. Believing that club people needed to hear her gospel music, Della took the Meditations into swank nightclubs later on when her own star ascended. Della got to the point where she need-

ed an influential manager. Al Green, who thought Della had enormous cross-over potential, called his friend in New York, Lee Magid, who worked at Savoy Records, while managing Varetta Dillard and the Emmett Slay Trio.

In chapter 13 of Arnold Shaw's excellent *Honkers & Shouters* book (MacMillan, 1978), Lee Magid explained how the two met. Della had borrowed twenty-five dollars to come to New York to meet with Lee Magid at the Baby Grand where Varetta Dillard was holding forth. Varetta had just married and was becoming difficult for Lee to handle. The timing was good. "So in comes this girl," said Lee. Nipsey Russell was the emcee. So I says, 'Nipsey, put her on the stage for me.' Apollo emcee Willie Bryant was there in the front. And this chick got up there, and I'll never forget it. She sang "There'll never be another you" as a ballad and up-tempo the second chorus. And then "Birth of the Blues" and forget it! The house came down! She was the prettiest thing I'd seen - her hands, her diction. I says a female Al Hibbler! No question! She could be the greatest but she took me a long time to get started."

Della, catching Lee Magid's lascivious looks, was a little apprehensive at first. She was not going to go for sexual favors in return for open doors. She was looking for good management. Before moving to New York and signing a management contract with Magid in November 1954, Della, in the midst of divorce from her first husband, factory worker Vermont Taliaferro, made her recording debut on the short-lived Great



Photo courtesy of the Las Vegas News Bureau





## The Meditation Singers Della, Dellian, Laura Lee, Ernestine & Marie

who had just signed himself and his Bradford Specials with Specialty Records run by Art Rupe in Hollywood, California, then suggested that the Meditations send a demo tape out to Specialty for audition.

In January 1954 Earnestine, Marie, Carrie and Della Reese put a tape together for Rupe on which "He Made It All Right," "Jesus Is Always There," "Too Close To Heaven" (a nod to Alex Bradford) and "God Is Good To Me" were recorded. Della held forth on the soulfully beautiful "Jesus is Always There," rendered in two tempos. These four songs languished in the Specialty vault until 1992 when Lee Hildebrand and myself issued them on a Meditations Specialty CD collection entitled "Good News" (Specialty 7032).

Art Rupe obviously could not see the sales potential in releasing the Meditations songs. Nevertheless, Della's powerful, sometimes smooth, sometimes gruff performance on "Jesus is always there" has never been surpassed in terms of grit by any of her later recordings. However, Rupe was sufficiently interested to have the girls signed and recorded at his own expense at a professional studio in Detroit on April 25, 1954. The line-up here included Earnestine, Carrie and Herbert, leads, with Marie, contralto, and Emory Radford at the piano. The session, which took up most of the afternoon, netted seven songs plus a station plug for WDIA in Memphis. Rupe cautiously chose to issue only one single, "I'm determined to run this race" flipped with "Promise to meet me there" lead by Herbert Carson in July 1954. Little more than a three-star rating in July 1954's Billboard seemed to come of it.

While broader opportunity escaped the Meditations, the brightening star of Della Reese was about to shine. An announcement in Billboard's April 1955 Talent Topics column proclaimed the signing of Della Reese to Jerry Blame's Jubilee label on New York's Broadway. This was due to a demo cut for staffers Sid Bass and Roy Jordan. Lee Magid would continue to undertake artist management. The article went on to state that Della would be called upon to record pop and r & b material in the hope that she would be able to cross over into both markets.

June 1955 found Della touring with the Erskine Hawkins band behind her first Jubilee release, "In the Still of the Night," alongside such luminaries as La Vern Baker, the Spaniels, Roy Hamilton and Jimmy Reed. A month later it was announced that Della would be the guest on "The Woolworth Hour" with Percy Faith and that this would be followed by a booking at the Howard Miller Chicago Theatre alongside Pat Boone and the Meadowlarks. Sales of "In the Still of the Night" topped out at half a million copies. Yet Della says she has seen no proof of this on royalty statements. Every now and again when on home turf she would put in a turn with the Meditations. Willa Ward-Royster, Clara Ward's glamorous sister, in her book, *How I Got Over* (Temple Press, 1997) recalls a song battle against the Meditations in Detroit. "Della was singing high then," Willa remembers. "Her voice was absolutely beautiful, and those girls really showed off. That night the Wards lost, and the cup deservedly went to the Meditations." Diana Ross also remembers sitting and watching Della and the girls at the New Liberty Baptist Church.

During the mid-Fifties when Berry Gordy was scraping a living writing songs, he would frequent The Flame Show Bar in the hope that at least one of the black performers there would want to try out one of his compositions. His sisters, Anna and Gwen, ran a photo concession at the Show Bar, and Berry often helped out in the darkroom. Watching Sarah Vaughn and Della Reese perform inspired Berry Gordy to no end. Marvin Gaye also stopped by to catch the headliners at the Flame at night while working on the auto assembly lines during the day. Della's second Jubilee release, "Time After Time," was issued in September 1955. ♦

*Next Issue: Part Two (1931-1969) The Rise to Fame and Fortune*

Lakes label, owned by Kenneth C. Campbell Jr. and run by his partner Tony Vance out of Detroit, no doubt an arrangement set up by (Swinging) Sax Kari, the label's A & R man, who was at that time enjoying some success of his own with the re-release of "Daughter" ("That's Your Red Wagon"). Great Lakes was a kind of temporary offshoot for the States record label in Chicago with which Kari had contractual dealings. The session was held at Bill Putnam's Universal Studio in Chicago.

Backed up by Jimmy Hamilton and ex-members of the Red Saunders and Ellington bands, Della recorded a passable rendition of the old Jo Stafford favorite "Yes Indeed," a war song, coupled with "Blue and Orange Birds." After Della moved to Manhattan and signed with Lee Magid, Lee approached Erskine Hawkins on Della's behalf. Hawkins was looking for a singer to front his band as things looked bleak on the instrumental front. Lee offered to put up the cash to record Della with Hawkins' outfit. Della stayed but did not record with Hawkins for six months, earning \$85 a week.

During the summer of 1953 the Meditations - Earnestine, Marie, Lillian and baritone Herbert Carson cut their first recording session in back of Joe Von Battle's record store at 3530 Hastings Street in Detroit. Unbeknownst to the Meditations, Battle leased two songs to Syd Nathan at De Luxe Records who promptly issued them on a single in September 1953. Disgruntled with the shady dealings conducted behind their backs, the group turned to their friend Prof. Alex Bradford for help. Bradford,