

# "The Angel from Detroit"

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

Part Two (1931-1969)

### The Rise to Fame and Fortune

BY OPAL LOUIS NATIONS

**D**ella Reese is today at the top of the TV ratings with her show *Touched by an Angel* but there were times back a quarter century ago when Della's ratings hit rock bottom. Her first regular network series assignment was as cast member in NBC's hit comedy *Chico and The Man*. The show made relatively unknown stand-up comic Freddie Prinze an overnight superstar. Freddie could not take the rush, and his life spun out of control, culminating in the misuse of pills, booze and drugs.

In an effort to refocus away from Prinze's major role, Della was promoted to principal player, but after Prinze's suicide the ratings plummeted. Della was ignored by network TV during the early 1980s, then was hired again and again for parts on doomed sitcoms before her first major series success, *The Royal Family*, as wife of Redd Foxx which debuted in 1991. This was quite a contrast to Della's powerhouse singing career back in 1956 when she raced down a glamorous fast-track that had her zipping from gig to gig amidst frenzied fans who insisted on encore after encore.

In February 1956 Della played the Rock N' Rollorama, a three-day extravaganza at Detroit's Fox Theatre, mc'd by WJBK's Mickey Shorr and WKMJ's Robin Seymore. Star acts included Bobby Charles, the Cadillacs, the Cleftones and the Four Tunes. The trades noted that the artists were overwhelmed by fans when they entered the street. Shorr was mobbed and ended up in hospital. The show drew 42,000 patrons and grossed \$57,000. "Years from now," Della's third single, hit the streets. In March Della did a week's stint at The Regal in Chicago with the Orioles and Eddie Heywood's Orchestra.

Della really wowed the crowd in June 1956 as a guest at the Westchester Coin Operators' Guild annual dinner. After a feverish run-through of her brand new fourth release entitled *Headin' Home* (a cover of the Shirley Gunter / Queens release on Modern), hard-boiled members of the guild were clapping and stomping their feet, shouting and singing along. Encore followed encore. The enthused members would not let Della off stage. The crowds at Annapolis City the following

All photos courtesy of Lett Entertainment



### The royal family – Della and her TV husband, Redd Foxx.

month topped all previous records. Carr's Beach Amphitheater played to a sell-out gathering of 8,000. A turn-away crowd of many thousands was reported. Route 655 was jammed for five miles and took seven hours to clear. The show, an all-star line-up included Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers, Chuck Berry, Shirley and Lee, the Clefones, Spaniels, Della Reese and Illinois Jacquet. Turnout was reported to have come from four neighboring states.

Jubilee Records released "My Melancholy Baby" on a single. In July, Tim Gale Agency's Top Record Stars Show of 1956 hit Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto. Deejay George "Hound Dog" Lorenz of WKBW in Buffalo introduced Little Richard, Carl Perkins, Al Hibbler, the Teenagers with Frankie Lymon, Chuck Berry, Della Reese and many more. After her Jubilee release of *In the Meantime*, Della appeared at Neapolitan City, New York's Rock & Roll Palace with Clyde McPhatter, the Heartbeats and others. Between Christmas and New Year Della starred at Detroit's Fox Theatre in a package including Ivory Joe Hunter, Bo Diddley, the Nightcaps and others.

1957 was chock-full of landmark events for Della. In April Jubilee released *How Can You Not Believe* which was followed shortly thereafter by her first Mono album release, *Melancholy Baby* to cash in on the single's runaway success. Della decided to marry again, this time an accountant by the name of Leroy Gray, but physical abuse led to bitter disappointment. They divorced after a short while. Jubilee issued *And That Reminds Me* which was chosen as record-of-the-week by Hunter Hancock at KPOP in L.A. This led to the platter becoming a major hit and the nomination of "Most Promising Singer" by *Billboard*, *Cashbox* and *Variety* magazines.

1958 saw the release of *Let's Rock*, Della's first venture onto the silver screen. *Let's Rock*, directed by Harry Foster, was little more than the filming of one of Della's recent package tours plus a lame plot concerning a singer and his resistance to the onslaught of rock & roll. Co-stars included Paul Anka, Julius La Rosa, Roy Hamilton, the Royal Teens and Danny and the Juniors. Wink Martindale also appeared and may have had something to do with Della's entry into TV sitcoms later on. Her dazzlingly radiant appearance in the movie is unforgettable. Her shimmering "hallmark" skin-tight mermaid-type gown plus her sparkling on-screen persona live on in the minds and hearts of all her fans.

The Jubilee release of *How Can You Lose (What Cha Never Had)* came out on the heels of *By Love Possessed*. The company also issued three album collections. Two of these turned out to be her best work in gospel and rhythm & blues. The first of the three, *A Date With Della Reese*, reflects the sort of repertoire one normally associates with swank bar joints and supper clubs. The second was *Amen*, Della's gospel side with the Meditations (more on that a little later) and the third, *The Story Of The Blues*, supported, in part, with what sounds like the Four Tunes, finds Della in a fine, mellow, wee wee hours and definitely cool mood. Her telling of how the blues came up from the bottom-lands and ended up in suburban, smoke-filled clubs is a moody classic. *The Story Of The Blues* is Della's high water mark and this was reflected in its healthy sales figures.

With Della constantly on the road and Carrie Williams' full-time involvement in her Detroit-based beauty salon, Earnestine was forced to look to her own for easy replacements. This is where Laura Lee entered the picture. Laura Lee was born Laura Newton in Chicago on March 9, 1945 but was raised in Detroit. In 1954 her mother suffered a serious illness and was no longer able to take care of the family. The Newtons were members of The New Liberty Baptist Church at which Rev. Ernest A. Rundless was the pastor. Laura wound up as ward of the church and was consequently adopted by Earnestine, the minister's wife.

Laura showed promise early on and soon became a necessary cornerstone with the Meditations. Under the guidance of Della's arranger/pianist Kirk Stuart, Della and the Meditations cut the landmark gospel



album *Amen* in Detroit. Soldiers included Earnestine, Laura Lee, temporary member De Lillian Price and Della's sister Marie Waters with Emory Radford on organ. Della and the group gave out impressive renditions of the traditional "Amen," the downheartedly beautiful "Hard to get along" on which Della and Laura traded licks to see how blues-colored each could get, the high octane "Jesus Will Answer Your Prayer," and a sanctified reading of "I Know the Lord Has Laid His Hands On Me."

The album sadly faded into obscurity soon after its release. However, in 1999, I resurrected three of the aforementioned cuts for inclusion in a best of Jubilee Gospel collection entitled *Heaven Belongs To You* (Westside [England] WBM 588.) The previously unreleased whirlwind-like "Certainly Lord" was also included to show how well Della could put over a sermon.

A 1958 by-line in the *Billboard* column "R & B Beat" proclaimed the imminent release of Della's first live album, recorded during one of her many residencies at Chicago's famous Mr. Kelly's. The collection would include liner notes by noted Sun-Times columnist Irv Kupcinet, it was announced. The album resurfaced in 1998 when Westside Records in England chose to issue it with the *Story Of The Blues* collection on CD. During the *Amen* album session Della cut "Sermonette," perhaps her finest cross-over song on which she demonstrated how deeply her roots lay in the church. "Sermonette" met with much praise when it surfaced as a single in November 1958.

Della's album output for 1959 gave us two collections, *What Do You Know About Love* and the highly successful *And That Reminds Me*, a title lifted from Della's most successful single release of 1957, paved the way for what was to become Della's most successful single, "Don't You Know," her debut opus on RCA Records.

Meanwhile, Meditations' Earnestine, Laura Lee, Marie Waters, first soprano Loraine Vincent, along with the great James Cleveland were lured back to Specialty Records by Prof. Alex Bradford who served as Art Rupe's gospel talent scout and A&R man. Laura Lee, whose voice had deepened, moved down from soprano to alto, and Loraine stepped

## Della's graduation to become a minister.



into her place. Cleveland had moved to Detroit after breaking away from Chicago's Caravans to direct the choir at Rev. Craig's Prayer Tabernacle. During his stay he found time to write, arrange, and sing lead with, and for, the Meditations. Realizing the potential of one of the best singers and songwriters in gospel being joined to one of the hardest-singing female gospel groups, Art Rupe signed them up and sent them to the Universal Recording Studios in Chicago, with instructions to have them sing with feeling and much spirit (soul). Cleveland was no stranger to the Meditations, having both officiated as pianist for the Moments of Meditation Choir and having served in the same capacity with the Meditations back in 1954.

Approximately ten songs were committed to tape, only four of which (three with Cleveland on lead) were ever released on single and/or album until 1992 when Lee Hildebrand and myself issued the entire session on the aforementioned *Good News Meditations* collection (Specialty 7032.)

In January 1960 Della scored once again with a single on RCA called "Not One Minute More." Although the record did not reach number one as did "Don't You Know," the release broke into the Top Twenty R & B Hits in *Billboard Magazine*. Two top-selling albums ensued, *Della* (her debut RCA collection) and *Della By Starlight*.

The Meditations signed with their old friend Carmen Murphy at Hob (House of Beauty) Records where Motown's Mickey Stevenson served as A&R man. The Meditations had become a super-group with the addition of soprano Verline White, a.k.a. Rodgers, Donna Hammond and Cassietta George from Chicago's Caravans. Meanwhile, Cleveland had moved on, and Vincent had quit the business. The Meditations stayed with Hob for two years, over which time they recorded albums and singles.

By 1961, Della's life was beginning to take a turn. She then adopted her two-year-old niece, Deloreese "Dumpsey" Daniels. Motherhood brought a sense of responsibility to her life. One side of her wanted the feeling of security that came from being a parent. Motherhood saved her from the temptation of drugs, the wild life, the fast track. Even at

thirty-one, she no longer felt able to hang out all night. But she would play the clubs on occasion, sometimes with the Meditations as her back-up group.

RCA continued to issue albums, three in 1961 alone, including the exciting and extremely successful *Della Della Cha Cha Cha*, a Latin-tinged departure from the norm. But releases dropped off after that, having been reduced to just one release a year from 1962 through 1965, the year of her one and only ABC Paramount release, *Della Reese Live*. While Della spent more and more time during the 1960s trying to be a good parent, the Meditations, on the other hand, were very much on the music scene.

After one not so memorable single for Sam Cooke's Sar imprint, the gals signed with Herman Lubinsky's Gospel label out of Newark, New Jersey. Four sessions and two years later, the group cut two pew-burning singles for Mike Hanks' Detroit-based D-Town label. By now, Cassietta George had returned to the Caravans, and Patricia Lyles had been taken aboard as alto. In August 1966, the Meditations signed with Chess Records in Chicago. Under the stewardship of Gene Barge, the group cut three church-wrecking albums at the Tel Mar Studios with Victoria Beavey writing arrangements and helping out on piano.

A year before, in 1965, Laura Lee had quit gospel and crossed over into r&b. Her first secular outing was put out on Eddie Wingate's Detroit-based Ric Tic imprint. Shortly more than a year later, she too was signed with Chess Records where she enjoyed a string of charted records (including *Up Tight*, *Good Man*) into 1969. The Meditations went on to record for other labels, and so did Laura.

A little more than twenty-five years ago, Laura Lee and the Meditations, with Earnestine, got together with Andre "Bacon Fat" Williams and at San Lewis's Jewel Records Manufacturing in Shreveport put out an interesting funk-driven gospel album. With Andre producing and arranging, Laura and Earnestine turned out some fine performances including a deep version of Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come" and a gut-bucket rendition of "Soulful Prayer," issued with just about the worst album jacket art imaginable, the record undeservedly sunk without trace.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Della appeared on many TV shows. Cameos on *The Perry Como*, *Jackie Gleason* and *Ed Sullivan Shows* prepared her for *The Tonight Show*. Being the first female ever to host *The Tonight Show*, was a daunting experience for Della. This led to her own syndicated talk/variety TV show called simply *Della*. An array of film and TV sitcom appearances have kept Della in the public eye these last thirty years.

In 1983 she married Franklin Thomas Lett, Jr.. In 1987, Della was nominated for a Grammy as Best Female Soloist in Gospel Music. Two years later she became an ordained minister at Johnnie Coleman's Institute. Back in 1979 Della collapsed from a massive brain aneurysm while on the set of *The Tonight Show*. She suffered a brainstem stroke which caused, in Della's words, "arterial tears." She underwent two brain surgeries and was truly lucky to survive. "I've been through the valley of the shadow of death," she told Dotson Rader of the San Francisco Chronicle. "My brain exploded. I don't fear it anymore. I really understand that death is part of life, and after life there's just more life." ♦

*Opal Louis Nations, November 2001. With help and guidance from Della Reese*