

THE RHONDA DAVIS STORY

BY OPAL LOUIS NATIONS

Rhonda Davis is an extraordinary talent possessed with a remarkably lively, bright and effusive personality. Along with a voice as strong and compelling as any leading gospel or soul diva in the star-studded show biz firmament today, Rhonda never ever collected her fair share of dues. A writer, a poet, and person quick to learn, she is never one to forget a single turn in her life, quite a feat for a woman who survived by sheer miracle a near fatal auto accident and temporary bout of amnesia. Her vocal shadings often evoke Aretha's mellismas coupled with occasional soft, smoky cadences over in the Ann Peebles school of Soul, confected with a personal flair for emotional expression. Rhonda sings with warmth and compassion.

Born in Leavenworth, Kansas, November 13, 1948, Rhonda grew up the second oldest of nine children, five boys and four girls. Her mother, Mattie C. Williams, was a strong-willed, holy rolling preacher who became a Pentecostal minister when Rhonda reached her early teens. Her father, Paul E. Williams Sr., proprietor of a grocery store, Williams Grocery. "My father was also the first black man to be admitted into the P.F.W. union, when he worked in construction, pouring concrete and stuff like that," says Rhonda "we lived in a large twelve-room house with two bathrooms and a yard stretching two country blocks", she adds. Their house was situated at Fifth and Pennsylvania Streets, and the family grew most of their vegetables and even raised corn. Mattie and the kids attended The Leavenworth Pentecostal Church, the flagship of the Pentecostal Churches of the World, a holy-rollers sect that often hosted church conventions.

Mattie started young as traveling evangelist before settling down. Paul built a portable lemonade and candy store for the kids in his property and they all learned the fundamentals of retail commerce working at the place when not in school. Paul also hunted rabbits, deer, pheasant and quail in his spare time to supplement the family diet. Later on, Paul became a wall-guard at Leavenworth Penitentiary and saw frequent unrest. One riot lasted three weeks. Puerto Ricans and Blacks got into a fight, and a couple of guards were killed.

As far as singing talent was concerned, the main focus was on Paul Junior. Paul Junior sang in high school where he became the pride of the school. Helater made quite a name for himself around Leavenworth singing R&B. Rhonda envied her brother and wanted to be like him. She never attended church seriously at this time. Her most frequent attendance was mainly on holidays. In 1960, when Rhonda was twelve, Mattie was put in charge of organizing the annual Pentecostal Assemblies Convention at Leavenworth. "You must be born again", was the theme of the convention, and a song of that title was chose to commemorate the occasion. Rita Brown, a soloist five years older than Rhonda, was slated to sing the song, while Mattie, using the melody as a background, was expected to give out a sermonette. For some unexpected reason, Brown was unable to show. "I was taught to sing in fourth grade", says Rhonda, "and I was familiar with all the words to 'You Must Be Born Again'. I was a big fan of **Dorothy Love Coates** and **The Gospel Harmonettes** who had written and recorded the tune for Specialty Records in 1954, but I was not expecting to be asked to sing it in front of thousands of people".

Up to that point, the twelve-year-old had only sung in the family group, The William Singers, composed of seven of the children. But she mostly accompanied on piano, an accomplishment she had achieved mostly by ear after convincing her mother she could do it. Little Rhonda Davis stepped forward to sing, "You Must Be Born Again", and the church was spellbound. Mattie was equally overwhelmed by a talent she had never before suspected, and almost at once thought up schemes to exploit her daughter's gift. Rhonda, from that point on, was to become her mother's child prodigy. Mattie had a talent for songwriting, and penned many compositions based on Biblical references, song that could easily augment any of her sermons.

"When I stepped down from the podium that first time", says Rhonda, "I felt baptized in the holy spirit". Believing she had found true religion, Rhonda joined the Young People's Junior Choir. Mattie worked on Rhonda's musical repertoire. "My mother sang me songs at home, and I, with the ability to pick things up quickly, learned them in no time", says Rhonda. "I even came up with lyrics when lyrics needed to be found", adds Rhonda, "and we also included traditional numbers and songs written by others".

In 1962 Mattie wrote a song called "God Is My Refuge" which Rhonda sang at church. "God Is My Refuge" became an enormously popular song at Pentecostal gatherings. Mattie was a natural-born promoter and used this skill to open doors for

Rhonda's talent wherever she could. After showing her off around various churches, Mattie invited major touring gospel acts to her church so that Rhonda could be seen by a broader cross-section of church-folk. She usually placed Rhonda midway down the bill and often introduced her as a young gospel phenomenon. Rhonda appeared at the most prestigious Kansas City showplace, The Memorial Auditorium, and was billed alongside **The Staple Singers**, **Caravans**, **Mighty Clouds of Joy**, **Dixie Hummingbirds** and others of equal or lesser reputations. She shared billing with **Rev. James Cleveland** and **Roger Roberts** with **The Cleveland Singers**. Cleveland bestowed upon Rhonda the title of 'Princess of Gospel Music', a distinction almost as grand as that awarded to **Mahalia Jackson**, Queen of Gospel Music.

"My mother was a busy woman", says Rhonda. "She was holding down a day job, working as a registered nurse at Cushing

and how her daughter would represent the songs. Not once did Rhonda take the trip south from Dallas to Houston to record at Robey's recording facility. Mattie recorded Rhonda at the Pentecostal Church with Mark Wilson, principal pianist, and Arvena Busey, principal organist (both Wilson and Busey played organ and piano and sometimes switched chairs on recordings.) Mattie continued to send demos, and in the spring of 1965 Peacock issued "God Is My Refuge" (Rhonda's best loved gospel song) and "He Watches Me" (His eye on the sparrow) (Peacock 3056). Rhonda was billed as a fifteen-year-old gospel progeny on the label (she was seventeen when it came out).

"God is my refuge," supposedly penned by the Rev. Mattie C. Williams, is a short, mid-tempo romp through the valley of death and other adversities. Rhonda wails, screams and pleads with grit and conviction. Mrs. C.D. Martin's "His Eye Is On The Sparrow" is given a solid, churchy feel and only occasionally breaks with tradition when Rhonda changes tempo and gives out extra bursts of energy. Both songs were reissued eight years later on Peacock's Songbird subsidiary and a year later still on a MCA various artists collection. "God Is My Refuge", actually recorded in 1964, turned heads and pricked up ears. The song caught the attention of John and Vivian Carter at Vee Jay Records in Chicago. Vee Jay, at this point, was sinking fast and needed impressive, fresh and inexpensive talent to pull it out of the red. The Carters offered Mattie five thousand dollars for the rights to record Rhonda Davis singing rhythm & blues. Mattie flatly turned down their offer, but Rhonda, to this day, regrets being unable (she was underage) to contradict her mother's decision.

Meanwhile Rhonda continued to sing gospel dressed in beautiful hand-made gowns. Mattie and Aunt Edith shared the cost of having a seamstress run them up. Aunt Edith operated the only restaurant/nightclub in Leavenworth, 'Edith's', on Third Street next door to the Mutual Bank, smack in the center of town. Robey at Peacock Records had pigeon-holed Rhonda and did not want her to switch to R&B. Never once did she succumb and sing the devil's music at her aunt's establishment.

During the winter of 1965, Rhonda with her mother took a train out to California. The pair stayed in the Berkeley home of one of Rhonda's brothers who was in the Marines. The brother was told he had to serve on active duty in Vietnam, just six months before he was due for discharge. The news angered the Marine to such a degree that he lost his cool and punched out his C.O., who instantly threw him in the brig. Mattie could only stay a few days and had to return to her nursing job, leaving Rhonda with the task of bailing her brother out of trouble. "This was why we came west in the first place," says Rhonda. With her mother gone, Rhonda felt stranded, even though Elder Edwards of the Pentecostal Church in Richmond was kind enough to offer support.

In 1967, and without Rhonda's prior knowledge, Robey issued a second gospel single on Peacock, "My Redeemer," backed with "That's Alright". Both titles had been sweetened in Houston with the addition of bass, drums, guitar and a mixed (sessions) vocal group. Nothing happened to the record, and it faded into obscurity. In 1970, the late Don Barksdale (deejay, basketball coach and owner of Rhythm Records) held a talent contest at the Showcase Club in Oakland. Turning her back on gospel soloing, Rhonda entered and won first place for singing Sam Cooke's arrangement of "A Change Is Gonna Come" backed by the Barksdale house band lead by Bay Area guitarist Eugene Blacknell who had just enjoyed a measure of success with his own record on Boola Boola called "The Trip" (Parts 1 and 2.). Blacknell approached Rhonda after the show and asked if she would like to work with him as featured soloist at Al's House of Smiles. This was Blacknell's regular gig where a high-off-the-ground stage often featured go-go-dancers in scantily clad attire.

Rhonda longed for a change and a chance to do something way out of line, a bold step contrary to her domineering mother's approval. Rhonda joined Blacknell and met and shared a romantic liaison with Blacknell's tenor player, **Robert Spencer**. Rhonda played Al's House of Smiles for a year, then was approached by Luther Elarms who was about to open the Off-Plaza Club at 1751 Fulton Street in San Francisco. Jules Broussard was Elarms' proposed house band.

The Broussard Band was composed of, among others, Chester Thompson, organ (who later defected to Tower of Power), Fred Casey on drums and Broussard himself on tenor sax. Broussard had shared music-stands with both Count Basie and Ray Charles. It was during this time that Rhonda hooked up with both Dubose Stephens, who, according to Rhonda, was both promoter for Don Robey's Duke Records in Houston and in some way affiliated with Saul Zaentz at Fantasy Records in Berkley. Together with fiance Robert Spencer, Rhonda had co-written the music and lead



Memorial Hospital and managing my singing career. Once I sang on a program with Dorothy Love Coates and the Gospel Harmonettes, and as a big fan of Dorothy's, I asked if I could sing one of her songs, "How Much More" (Savoy 4233) during my performance. She gave her permission, but I bet she wished she had changed her mind when I almost stole the song from her", brags Rhonda. "My mother used to get as much as 3,500 for me to appear on some of the big gospel programs", adds Rhonda.

Knowing that Don Robey's Duke/Peacock Records in Houston was the major and most influential gospel label in the South, Mattie laid plans to get her daughter with the company. "My mother had a demonstration album made at a local studio from a two-track tape. She shelled out \$356 to cover studio costs", recalls Rhonda. The record contained less than a dozen songs accompanied by piano and organ. Standards like "Beams Of Heaven", "Amazing Grace" and "Rock of Ages" were included with charts written by Rhonda and Mattie. The album was rushed to Don Robey, and Mattie, with the usual dogged persistence, hounded the company until she received a satisfactory answer. Dave Clark, Robey's gospel A&R man, liked what he heard and relayed the message to Mattie who drove a hard bargain, thus securing the most lucrative contractual agreement for her daughter. "Mother dictated all the terms", says Rhonda, a feat rarely accomplished by anyone with so shrewd a businessman as Robey.

Mattie fought and won control over material arrangements

sheets to "Can You Remember" and "Long Walk On A Short Pier". Backed by the Eugene Blacknell Band, Rhonda recorded the two songs under Dubose Stephens' supervision at the Fantasy Studios on Parker Street in Berkeley. Rhonda was still legally under contract with Duke/Peacock Records at the time. It took a while for Dubose to persuade Robey that Rhonda had crossed over into R & B and, out of her mother's parental control, and had decided not to record more gospel material. The deal was this: "Long Walk" was intentionally written for Bobby 'Blue' Bland but Robey promised he would continue to record Rhonda in an R & B format later if she would consent to record "Long Walk" and "Can You Remember". "Can You Remember"/"Long Walk On A Short Pier" was waxed by Rhonda and issued on Duke Records in early 1972. "Can You Remember" is a perky, stringlaced, disco-like dance vehicle centering on the good times recalled with an old flame, while "Long Walk On A Short Pier" takes us into a sweet, bluesy, melancholy refrain of love's loss, sung deeply with Ann Peebles-type vocal inflections. "Long Walk" started to take off when local deejays, like Al Mooreland at KDIA, picked up the record early on and pushed it hard. But the demise of Duke/Peacock Records (the company having been sold to ABC Paramount) put the lid on the right sort of promotion. However, the single quickly became a deep-soul collectors' item. Shortly after ABC Paramount assumed control of Duke/Peacock Records, a various gospel artists album surfaced entitled "Four Women In Christ" (Peacock PLP 194, reissued a year later as MCA 28048.) The collection featured **Sister Jessie Mae Renfro, Sister Josephine James, Bertha Robinson** and Rhonda Davis singing four selections each. Together with the reissue of "God Is My Refuge" and "His Eye Is On The Sparrow" (He Watches Me) were issued two songs held over from the same session, "Walk Around Heaven All Day" and "I've Got Jesus". "Walk Around Heaven All Day" is a lengthy, beautifully stretched, slow Caravans song on which Rhonda howls and wails in perfect abandon. "I've Got Jesus", a Dorothy Love Coates belter, is given a furious and fiery treatment. Rhonda must have leveled the Pentecostal Church with her animated performance on this one. During the day, Rhonda worked for the P T & Telephone company, and in the evening she continued to work the clubs. Having switched from the Off-Plaza to the Black Night Club on Broadway, Rhonda fronted the John Turk Band. Turk played organ and trumpet at the same time. Rhonda worked five nights, Wednesday through Sunday, for \$400 a week. At P T & T, Rhonda met Judge Roderick Duncan, then an attorney. In 1973 Rhonda wanted release from her Duke/Peacock contract, and Duncan took on Rhonda's case. Despite the fact that ABC Paramount had assumed ownership of Duke/Peacock, Robey was kept in place as front man for the company. Although Duncan managed to secure Rhonda's release just before Robey's death, things did not work out at the Black Night Club. All sorts of top acts dropped in whenever they appeared in town, including **The Pointer Sisters**. The Pointer Sisters sang vocal backgrounds on one of Rhonda's shows. As a courtesy, Rhonda introduced them to the audience, and they sang a couple of numbers. The outcome of all this was that The Pointers ended up stealing Turk's drummer. Rhonda felt she had been taken. Tiring of the local scene and longing for a fresh start, Rhonda moved to Philadelphia and got a job working as a private secretary at Atlantic Richfield. She pulled a jazz-rock trio together called **Mean Prescription**. Mean Prescription was composed of **John Hammond**, piano, **Charlie Parker**, bass and **Len Bryant**, drums. All sang background, but Bryant also doubled on vocal duets. John Hammond had replaced Robert Spencer as Rhonda's current love interest. Mean Prescription worked a regular gig at the Banks Street Supper Club in South Philadelphia. Rhonda's regular income was considerable. She soon found herself able to buy a new luxury car. Shortly after the purchase of her new vehicle, Rhonda was involved in a near-fatal accident. Driving slowly in a 35-mile an hour zone at Fifty-Second and Lancaster Streets, Rhonda was broadsided by a hit and run driver speeding at 70. Rhonda's new car rolled up and over traffic islands for three or four blocks. She awoke at Philadelphia's General Hospital with three broken ribs, head injuries and a damaged lung. The hospital staff all thought a miracle had taken place. Rarely had anyone survived so serious an accident. At the point of impact, Rhonda says she felt her spirit lifted up from her body and that her head hovered at a distance above. She says she saw an image of herself at the instant of death. Although suffering from physical injuries as well as temporary amnesia, Rhonda was allowed to leave Philadelphia General after only seven days. Having almost recovered, Rhonda returned to Richmond, California in 1976, but she never went back to music. "Oh, I can get back into music whenever I want to", says Rhonda. "I have a lot of material. I'm in contact with a number of good musicians, and I'm ready to go". Rhonda Davis has never lost her chops. She can give out as well as ever and is waiting for the right comeback call.

R H O N D A D A V I S D I S C O G R A P H Y

Album-length demonstration pressing, with Mark Wilson on organ and Arvena Busey, piano, Leavenworth, Kansas (1964)

- 1 Opening Narration "God's Creation" (James Weldon Johnson)
- spoken by Rev. Mattie C. Williams
- 2 "How Great Thou Art" by Rhonda Davis
- 3 "(I Know) The Lord Will Take Care Of Me" (Rev. Mattie C. Williams)
by Rhonda Davis
- 4 "Let Jesus Be Your Friend" by Rhonda Davis
- 5 "I Find No Fault In God" by Mark Wilson
- 6 "Rock of Ages" by Rhonda Davis
- 7 "Down By The Riverside" by Rhonda Davis
- 8 "(Lord Teach Me To) Wait" (Rev. Mattie C. Williams) by Rhonda Davis
- 9 "Amazing Grace" by Rhonda Davis
- 10 "Beams of Heaven" by Rhonda Davis (and others)

With Mark Wilson, organ, Arvena Busey, piano, some drum overdubbing, Leavenworth, Kansas (1965)

"God is My Refuge"/"He Watches Me"
Peacock 3056 (1965)/Peacock PLP 194 (1973)
Song Bird SBLP 206 (1973) and MCA LP 28048 (1974)

"Walk Around Heaven"/"I've Got Jesus" (recorded 1965)
Peacock PLP 194 (1973) and MCA LP 28048 (1974)

With Mark Wilson, organ, Arvena Busey, piano, plus drums, bass guitar and mixed vocal group overdubs, Leavenworth, Kansas (1965)

"My Redeemer"/"That's Alright"
Peacock 3104 (1967)

With Eugene Blacknell Band, Fantasy Studio, Berkeley, Ca (1972)

"Can You Remember"/"Long Walk On A Short Pier"
Duke 473 (1972)