

Nancy King (1940-)

By Lynn Darroch

For most of her career, Nancy King has been considered the Pacific Northwest's pre-eminent jazz singer. National recognition was slower to come, though she always received the praise of her peers. For twenty years, King was known as an underground classic—a supremely talented vocalist whose strict adherence to straight-ahead jazz and independent attitude at times got in the way of national tours and higher visibility. By the end of the 1990s, however, King had become one of the leading jazz singers in the world. An improvising musician in the tradition of singers Sheila Jordan, Betty Carter, and Ella Fitzgerald, King is a master of the bebop-based scat singing style made famous by Louis Armstrong, as well as the vocalese approach developed by singer and lyricist Jon Hendricks, in which jazz solos are set to lyrics.

The accolades began to arrive early for the former Nancy Whalley, who grew up outside Springfield, Oregon. She had already begun playing jazz professionally and won a beauty pageant and screen test as a teenager. When she enrolled at the University of Oregon in 1959, she began performing with guitarist Ralph Towner and bassist Glen Moore (who both went on to international fame with the group Oregon). She was asked to leave the University in 1960, King has reported, because of her association with African Americans and civil rights activism. She soon began singing at Jimbo's Bop City in San Francisco, where she met saxophonist Sonny King, who would become the father of the couple's three children (they did not marry); he died in 1983 at age 52 (Kaliss, September 1992). While in San Francisco, she also met and performed with jazz legends such as Pharoah Sanders and Miles Davis.

After singing on the Playboy Club circuit and performing with Charlie Smalls, songwriter for the musical, "The Wiz," King returned to Oregon. After nearly a decade of struggle, when she raised three sons on her own and sang in nightclubs on the side, King's first album, "First Date," was released in 1979. In Portland, King began performing with Leroy Vinnegar, John Stowell, Lawrence Williams, and Eddie Wied, among others. Over time, her reputation spread, and in 1986, jazz guitarist Herb Ellis called King "the greatest living jazz singer" in an interview with *Jazz!z* magazine.

In the late 1980s, King began performing in jazz festivals in Europe. Finally, in 1994, after the albums "Perennial," "Impending Bloom," "Potato Radio," and "Cliff Dance" were released in a span of three years, King won *Downbeat* magazine's Talent Deserving Wider Recognition poll for female vocalists. In 1996, King and her long-time pianist, Steve Christofferson, recorded the CD, "Straight into Your Heart," with the acclaimed Metropole Orchestra of The Netherlands, and she continued performing at jazz festivals abroad. In 2004, Grammy nominee and fellow jazz singer Karin Allyson invited King to tour with her. In 2006, King was nominated for a Grammy Award in the Best Jazz Vocalist category for her duo album with pianist Fred Hersch, "Nancy King Live at the Jazz Standard."

Sources

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