Lavelle White

“Music Is My Life – And My Life Is Music”

By Scott M. Bock

Lavelle White’s 85 year journey started out rough and, despite long stretches of success in music, her life has never turned out to be easy. A promising start – six early years writing songs and then recording for the notorious Don Robey for his Duke Records imprint – left her with few publishing credits and only twelve recorded sides working as a singer. She even toured for the notorious Don Robey for his Duke label, recorded for him, got her start with him. When I first started out in Houston, I had day jobs. I worked at fast food places, washed dishes – whatever I had to do to make it. Nowadays, they don’t have to start like that. It’s different with the kids. Some of them start out at their parent’s residence. And some of them start out big time. I knew I was going to be a singer about ten years after I got to Houston. I was going out to nightclubs. I knew some people. That’s where I was trying to sing. I got with musicians and called myself a singer and everybody would make fun of me and say: ‘My God, get her off the bandstand. She can’t carry a tune in a paper bag’. And, I would get angry. But anyways, it worked out that I did write some songs. Like, I did write, ‘Lead Me On’ for Bobby Bland. But, I sold it for $100 to Don Robey. Like, I did write, ‘Lead Me On’ for Bobby Bland. But, I sold it for $100 to Don Robey. It came out to be a hit. I wrote ‘If I Could Be With You’. I wrote several tunes. It came out to be easy. A promising start – six early years writing songs and then recording for the notorious Don Robey for his Duke Records imprint – left her with few publishing credits and only twelve recorded sides working as a singer. She even toured for the notorious Don Robey for his Duke label, recorded for him, got her start with him. When I first started out in Houston, I had day jobs. I worked at fast food places, washed dishes – whatever I had to do to make it. 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But, despite working so many decades as a performer, money has continued to elude the woman whose friends and fans call Miss Lavelle. A deeply religious woman, Lavelle finds solace in worship. She spends her days at home singing to herself, visiting with friends, and cooking – especially soul food and Mexican fare. Though she enjoys her home life, she says that she is always ready to board a plane for another gig. Sitting on her sofa in her Austin apartment, she quickly straightens out the record on her birthplace and sums up her early life. “I was born in Amite, Louisiana, not Mississippi. Amite is where I hung out as a kid. Down there – there were a lot of horrible things. I grew up where we were sharecroppers – cotton and corn. We were really sort of like slaves. I was with my mother. I wasn’t with my dad because my dad walked away and left me when I was five days old. And, that is a thing that really affects a person’s mind all their life. You can’t change it. You just have to live with it. I had like five brothers and four sisters. It was brutish because my brothers couldn’t finish going to school. They had to work in the fields ploughing with mules and horses – bailing hay – all this stuff. I was the baby. We didn’t have the same dad. Their daddy had passed away. My daddy came along some years later. We lived on the plantation – every place that I lived. We lived in Hollandale, Mississippi; Amite, Louisiana; Greensburg, Louisiana. We lived in places like Arcola, Mississippi – all down there. I don’t know whether those places are still there or not. My mother was a pianist. She played in the church. I grew up in the church. I’ve been singing spirituals ever since I was twelve. It was a small, little, Baptist church. I’m Catholic now. The only instrument in the church was the piano. We didn’t have a piano in the house. My mother always sang ‘Nearer My God To Thee’ – all of those songs. I sang those songs, too. The way it was in our church, everybody knew everybody. On the plantation everybody knew everybody. It wasn’t cool to me. Everybody knew everybody’s business. I was a kid and I didn’t like it. I left when I was about fifteen. I didn’t finish school but I always paid attention. I finished the tenth grade.”

HOUSTON IS WHERE I STARTED

Ms. White arrived in Houston in the mid-1950s. Her introduction to the active music scene there happened quickly but it took her years to get a start as a performer. “I came to Houston and that’s when I started with music. Back then you could sneak in clubs at that age and that’s what I did. I had a brother in Houston. And, he came and got me and brought me there. We were in the Heights. He just come and got me and said, ‘We’re going to take you’. So, that’s how it was. I wasn’t singing then with no bands or anything.

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Lavelle White. Antone's publicity photo. From the B&R Archive.