

Lavelle White

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

By Scott M. Bock



Lavelle White, Utrecht, 1995. Photo: Phil Wight.

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 a time with top national artists for Robey as part of Duke packages.

After her contract ended with Duke, years in Houston, New Orleans, and Chicago provided the nightclubs and juke joints she needed to work in order to hone her voice and develop her authoritative stage presence. But, stardom continued to elude her.

White's first full-length recording did not come about until decades later when at age 65 she was picked up by the Antone's label and settled in at the Austin, Texas club. She has made the most of this late second opportunity at stardom – playing major festivals and working in Europe. She released a total of three CDs for Antone's, the last in 2003, and she has appeared on a number of compilations and is featured in at least two music documentaries.

Her 45s and CDs present a superb singer with a clear and slightly husky voice. Despite her up and down career, she knows how she wants her music to sound and has consistently been surrounded by musicians who enable her to stretch out. No twelve-bar blues belter, White is far more likely to sing ballads, Memphis soul, as well as funky/grittier songs that showcase her vocal range.

She clearly has come a long way from the Louisiana and Mississippi growing fields that her family worked when she was a child. In 2006, she was inducted into the Texas Music Hall of Fame. She has appeared on Austin City Limits and been nominated for four W.C. Handy Awards.

A visual experience – colourful sequined dresses, carefully applied makeup, and berets or hats are now expected by her fans. She says that she will never get on stage in jeans and a T-shirt.

Her polished, powerful voice and her ability to pen songs has enabled

her to tour much of the world. 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 daddy. 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.

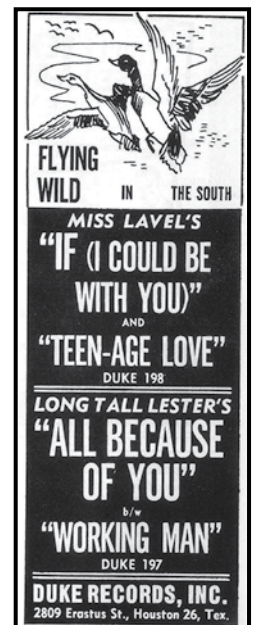
When I first started out in Houston, I had day jobs. I worked at fast food places, washed dishes – whatever I had to do to make it. Nowadays, they don't have to start like that. It's different with the kids. Some of them start out at their parent's residence. And some of them starts out big time.

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. It came out to be a hit. I wrote 'If I Could Be With You'. I wrote several tunes."

Miss LaVell, as Robey listed her when she recorded for him, got her start with Duke/Peacock Records ghost writing for



From Galen Gart's First Pressings.

Bland. On some of the songs she wrote and recorded herself, she was given partial credit. On others, her name was omitted and the name Deadric Malone was listed. (Deadric was Robey's middle name and the pseudonym he frequently used). White eventually released twelve sides as Miss LaVell for Robey from 1958 to 1964.

"When I was with Robey they didn't do a whole record album. He'd do three or four songs. And that was it – all 45s. I liked them because I wrote them. They're still selling.

Joe Scott – trumpeter and arranger worked there with all the musicians. This is how it all worked out. We did it live in the studio. You're in one room and the band is in another room. It's just like they're doing it now. You're looking through a mirror. It was just fun to me. I recorded with Johnny Copeland and Texas Johnny Brown.

Robey liked 'If I Could Be With You' – I sang it for Johnny Copeland and he put it on tape. It was Johnny Copeland said, 'I'm going to take this to Robey and maybe he'll like it'. So, he took it to Robey and they listened to it and they liked it and they recorded that and I wrote more songs.

I had to deal with Robey to get a recording deal. You have to. I got paid a little bit. That's the way it was. He was a gangster, he always carried a pistol. But, I guess he liked my songs. He recorded them!"

White says she was influenced by Dinah Washington, Ella Fitzgerald, and Etta James. But, she proudly explains that she found her own way in music and she thinks that makes her a better singer.

"I didn't have a teacher like they got now. And, I don't sound like anybody else. I don't want to sound like nobody else. In singing you have to find your own voice – your own momentum. The one thing you have to learn is your timing. You got to learn how not to sing over the counts. There are twelve-bar blues which gets to be 32 bar blues. Some of it is jazz – jazzy blues. Some of it is regular blues – twelve bars – and that's the way it goes.

In Houston, I sang with Clarence Hollimon and his brother, Sweets. I sang with Johnny Copeland. He was the greatest thing in Houston. I also sang with Johnny Brown and Joe Hughes and Clarence Green. This was mostly at the Hamilton Inn. That was the young people's hangout. It was great. It was a nightclub – a juke joint. There would be four pieces – guitar, drum, and bass – two guitars.

When I got to be about 21 or 22, I went out on shows with the Drifters, Little Willie John, Otis Redding, Etta James, Bobby Bland, Junior Parker. I can't remember them all.

We had a bus. We used to go to places – some of the little small towns like Jasper, Texas or to Dallas, Fort Worth, places like that – some places like the Big Easy. I still work there sometimes. We would go to little small towns. Sometimes we would take the door. Sometimes we would get paid up front."

ANTONE'S RECORDINGS

White considers her 1994 release for Antone's label the acknowledgement that had eluded her for so many years. Clifford Antone's club was in its heyday and Antone was always on the lookout for new artists. White's name came up when Lou Ann Barton recorded one of her songs and Antone brought her to sing at the club.

"I was finally recognised about fifteen or twenty years ago. I made my first CD then. But that's what happened to a lot of entertainers. Some people make it overnight [snaps finger] and die out soon. You take a person, that I would say, lingers with the music – tries with the ups and downs and stuff. They stay there. You hang in there. It helps.

I moved away from Houston in 1992. I came here to Austin and then I went to Chicago".

White lived in Chicago roughly from 1978 to 1986. She worked mostly at Kingston Mines.



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

Among the artists she mentions from that time are Lefty Dizz, Lonnie Brooks, and Buddy Guy and Junior Wells.

"Then I came back. I didn't come back because of Austin to be truthful. It was because I recorded for Antone's label. That's why I had to come back here. That's what the whole deal was. Clifford Antone appreciated me. He knew Evelyn Johnson of Duke



Label shots from the B&R Archive.

- Peacock Records and she sent me here to work down on his club when it was on Sixth Street – to do some shows with him. It was cool – Jimmy Reed and all of them. I knew Eddie Taylor.

That's how I got with Clifford. That's how he knew me. This was years ago – before the new clubs. My first CD was with Antone's. Derek O'Brien produced it. Some of the songs I wrote I redid them on Antone's."

White recorded three full-length CDs for Antone's label. 'Miss Lavelle' was released in 1994 and she was backed by members of Antone's house band and, old friend, Clarence Hollimon was borrowed from Blacktop Records; 'It Haven't Been Easy' came out in 1997; and 'Into the Mystic' was released in 2003. She has appeared on a number of compilations including 'Daughters Of The Alamo' which was released in 1997.

Despite the rocky road, White is philosophical about life and the business of music. "Why not have fun? Music is fun. Music is to make you happy. I say like this – we are all misused in the music field. You might as well face facts – even the big stars. You got to know what you're doing so the record companies don't take advantage of you.

I think my voice is better today than it used to be because it's smoother. I used to sing real rough. Sometimes I do a little scream. Everybody else wants to do it like me."

White says she has 'stacks of music,' she hasn't yet recorded. At one point, she talks about Angels singing songs to her in her dreams. And, she emphasises that she likes all kinds of music – including opera – but today mostly listens to gospel when she is alone.

"I'm always writing stuff – since I was a kid. I write on paper and napkins and all of that stuff. When I write, sometimes it's three o'clock in the morning sometimes. Or, I see things that interest me. I can see a cat that walks out there and write about that. I can look up there and see those pictures on the wall and write about that.

I hear the music when I write. I can play a little on the piano. You got to hear what you're feeling. You got to feel what you're hearing. You got to do right then what you are feeling. If you don't do it right then it might not come back to you the way it was the first time.

I always say I can do better with everything I do. Any singer, any musician will say, 'I can do better'. You can because there's something there. Somebody will say, 'That's great'. I can try to do better. I'm the type of person don't think I'm that great. I don't have the big head. I think I'm just like everybody else. This is the way I feel about myself. I'm just trying to sing and make a living.

Undaunted by a slowdown in gigs and little opportunity to record, White is always ready to travel to another gig. She simply loves singing for an audience.

"I'm ready [to play more gigs]. I'll do two or three gigs a day if I can. It's fun getting there. I get in the hotel and watch television – get me some food and relax. It's just fun all the way around. Music is what you make it.

I still go to New Orleans. I enjoy that. I play here. Not long ago I went to Italy. It was beautiful. They had a band out of Memphis. Boy, was they bad. They were right on it. They had rehearsed my songs.

You cannot go back and bring back what happened twenty years ago. Forget yesterday. My head is always out front. If you go back with your head, you're in trouble. You can't think back. You got to do something different – something new. You can't stay in the same old bag all the time. I'm not going to stay in that same bag. I got to come out of that bag.

It's fun meeting new people. It's fun being on the show with people. This is what's carrying me. Music is my life and my life is music."