

SLOANE • A JAZZ SINGER

A long friendship seeds a documentary

© Stephen Barefoot, May 2022
Executive Producer, SLOANE: A JAZZ SINGER

Carol Sloane March 5, 1937 - January 23, 2023

In the mid-70s, I was a 20-something returned Peace Corps volunteer who had served a three-year term in East Africa. Back home in NC, I got a job as a front desk clerk at the Raleigh Hilton. I didn't last long, however, as they somehow failed to appreciate my reasons nor accept my refusal to wear the most god-awful official company uniform necktie ever stitched.

On the morning they fired me, I took a walk around the neighborhood, trying to figure out what to do next. I saw a small notice on a light pole that advertised a bartending job at the funky, before-its-time, underground jazz club in nearby Cameron Village named The Frog & Nightgown.

It was a place to work where one got to choose his own ties. I interviewed and got the job. My first night there, a gentlemen took a stool at the bar, looked at me and said, "Hi. Who are you? You're new here."

I introduced myself - and he immediately asked, "So have you met or heard Carol Sloane sing yet?"

"I'm afraid not, sir," I replied. "This is my first night here. Who is Carol Sloane?"

A bit later that same night, a petite, attractive woman came in and took a seat at the other end of the bar - right next to "Samantha," the Frog's loyal, stylishly-attired mannequin who always sat perched in that last seat near the entry. The newly-arriving woman, about the same size as Samantha, glanced my way and said, "You're new here. Hi. My name is Carol Sloane."

Carol Sloane and I have been close friends and off-and-on colleagues since that night almost fifty years ago. I was the kid pouring the mixers behind the bar as she performed her periodic engagements as the most popular star jazz attraction at The Frog - so popular, in fact - that she had relocated from NYC to Raleigh, where she remained through the rest of The Frog's life.

The two of us appeared in local musical theatre productions together. We sang the duet of "My Ship" in a production of *Lady in the Dark* at Raleigh Little Theatre. We cooked dinner for each other. We listened to music. We went to movies. She taught me about her life as a jazz singer - and I grew more humbled by her strength and fortitude with each passing year.

Decades later, she looked me in the eye and whispered, "Do you really think I will matter to anyone after I'm gone?"

SLOANE • A JAZZ SINGER is a new feature-length documentary film, directed and edited by Michael Lippert, that is our team's pledge to Carol that she DOES matter NOW, that she mattered THEN and that she will still matter WHEN.

Carol Sloane was a young jazz vocalist who gained unexpected, instant and international acclaim after taking a mic on stage at a jazz festival in Newport, R.I. in 1961 and whispering, "It's okay, I'll just sing it *a cappella*," when the pianist said he didn't know the verse of the song she planned to sing.

In a suddenly-exploding career that placed her on stages with luminaries ranging from Oscar Peterson to Lenny Bruce, in multiple TV appearances on The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson, with Arthur Godfrey, Steve Allen and others, she was lauded by critics and fans alike as the next major star on the world's vocal jazz scene.

Then the rock beat of the British Invasion landed on our shores and became the rhythm of America. The "girl jazz singers" disappeared from TV screens. Clubs' doors began to close. Carol, in a quirky turn of fate, was then invited to travel with The Beatles and the Rolling Stones on parts of their first US tours, as Bob Bonis, Carol's booking representative at the time, had been contracted to manage those groups' initial concert tours across the States.

Carol didn't sing at their performances. She'd been invited to "just be one of the guys," so she traveled with them, shared conversations on planes and busses and sipped champagne with them in hotel hospitality suites. But it placed her in the vortex of the pandemonium as she began realizing how her newfound mop-haired friends and the musical uproar they were seeding would simultaneously edge her own musical style to the back row of what American audiences were eager to hear.

Carol and I stayed in touch after The Frog closed later in the 70s. She left NC to head back to NYC. Times grew tougher for her, both professionally and in her personal life. While she was looked upon by many as the "jazz singer's jazz singer" and the likely "next Ella Fitzgerald," gigs dried up. She returned to her fallback day job as a legal secretary with only sporadic singing engagements. Sadness and self-doubt settled in. She questioned her life, or perhaps more accurately, her reason to keep living.

I was still in NC. Carol and I spoke somewhat frequently. We'd talk about her dreams and we'd talk about mine. And in the early 80s, I naively grabbed mine and opened a jazz club in Chapel Hill, NC, a club in some ways quite akin to The Frog where Carol and I had met on my first night behind that bar.

By this time, Carol had moved to Boston, escaping a toxic romantic relationship in NYC. I phoned to ask if she might be willing to consider coming back to NC - to help me book the artists and be the face of a supper club named Stephen's, After All. It took Carol about one minute to say "Yes, that's what I'll do. Help me find a place to live. We'll bring the best of the best to appear at the club, and it'll never fail..."

It failed.

But it was heaven while it lasted, and all Carol had to do was lift the phone and make a call to Carmen McRae or George Shearing or Anita O'Day or Joe Williams or Shirley Horn and say "You gotta come down here and work this room...You're gonna love it." Carol herself would do a week's run every couple of months, but was on site at the club for every artist's engagement.

After Stephen's met the same fate as The Frog and Nightgown, Carol remained in Durham, growing more depressed at the lack of work coming her way. It was nothing new - but it wasn't as easy to face the grim economics. She lost her apartment. She lost her car. Her phone was cut off.

She moved into my house for a few months, assessing where to turn and starting each morning with a glass of Scotch. She moved back to Boston when she landed a gig in "The Starlight Room" on the top floor of a Howard Johnson's hotel overlooking the Citgo sign. She was a hit - not only with audiences but with impresario Buck Spurr who booked the room. They later married and settled into a quieter life in Stoneham, MA. When Buck developed serious illnesses, Carol became full-time caretaker. She and I would chat on the phone, and while she said she missed performing and recording, Buck was her first priority for as long as they were together.

In spring of 2018, Carol was invited to return to NC to sing "Bye Bye Blackbird" at the memorial service for Bob Spearman, one of the attorneys from former NC Governor Terry Sanford's law firm where Carol had worked as a legal secretary during her "Frog" years in Raleigh. She called to tell me she was coming down, that the law firm was paying her expenses, and that she could stay with me for a couple of days.

"If we found a spot, would you want to do a gig for a night or two?" I asked.

"Do you think anyone would come?" she replied.

We lined up a couple of nights at a cozy jazz room in Raleigh called "C Grace." And that's when I asked Carol Sloane if she'd give me permission to have the upcoming evenings filmed - maybe even look at some type of documentary project to be developed. Close personal friends who were filmmakers agreed that Carol's story needed to be told. Tickets went on sale for her two-night gig in Raleigh. All seats quickly sold out.

And that's when this documentary project took small, fragile wing. When Carol was subsequently booked for a "comeback" two-night gig at Birdland in NYC later that summer, we filmed there, too. She did a concert and master class at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center in Connecticut - and we filmed. She was booked for a week's residency with the jazz studies department at Duke University. Cameras rolled.

In fall of 2019, Carol was invited to do a live recording at Birdland. It would be her first recording in 30 years. She was anxious and self-doubting, but she said she wanted to prove she "still had it." We asked her permission to spend the ten days before that Birdland engagement filming her at home, talking to her on camera about her life and career and documenting every day leading up to the live recording date in the city.

She trusted me enough to say yes. I trusted her enough to know she'd be truthful.

Michael Lippert and the crew stayed by her side as she prepared, at age 82, to return to Manhattan's iconic Birdland to record a live album on September 20-21, 2019.

Carol Sloane has always sung the stories she has lived. The narrative of her life is revealed within the lists of cuts that appear alongside liner notes on the sleeves of her many LPs and CDs.

Her personal philosophy is delicately expressed in a song that, during performances over the past ten years, has become her parting pledge. "I Will Always Leave the Door a Little Open," composed by Johnny Mandel, with lyrics by Carol's dear friends Sir Richard Rodney Bennett and Franklin Underwood, is the map and guidebook to Carol's life. It is this rarely-recorded song of resilience that becomes the underlying thematic melody of the documentary, and it is her 'open door' that has allowed this film to reveal the core of truth and openness that Carol shared during those amazing days.

The film ends with the performance of this number at Birdland. Carol was booked to return to Birdland the following March - but COVID arrived and darkened marquees in every land. The following June, Carol suffered a serious stroke and has remained in a nursing facility near Stoneham since that time. The live album, Carol Sloane Live at Birdland, was released in April 2022 on Club 44 Records.

SLOANE: A JAZZ SINGER is a story about the life and career of Carol Sloane. But it is equally a story about resilience, about struggles of age and insecurity, about loss, hope, optimism, tenacity, respect and honoring those who've been your guideposts and laid the path for you. It's about a time in American culture when the songs reigned supreme.

It's a story about what can grow from holding a transistor radio in your hands as a 12-year-old - and finding, late at night in your room, music that speaks to your very soul.



With Carol, 1981, Chapel Hill, NC