

Carol Sloane, Jazz Singer Who Found Success Early and Late, Dies at 85

After seemingly being on the verge of stardom, she languished for decades, battered by changing tastes and bad luck, before enjoying a midlife comeback.



By Penelope Green

Feb. 3, 2023

The crowd had thinned by the time Carol Sloane, then 24, took the festival stage in Newport, R.I., in July 1961. The Saturday afternoon slot was a showcase for new talent, hence the sparse attendance. Ms. Sloane had chosen to sing “Little Girl Blue.” The pianist knew the tune but not the rarely performed introduction, so she sang it a cappella, hitting every ravishing note.

“When I was very young/The world was younger than I/As merry as a carousel. ...”

The audience was transfixed. Though the crowd was small, it included a group of influential music critics and some suits from Columbia Records, who mobbed her after her performance. Within a few weeks she was offered a Columbia contract.

Ms. Sloane, the honey-voiced jazz singer who was once considered an heir to Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae but who struggled for decades, battered by changing tastes and sheer bad luck, before enjoying a midlife comeback, died on Jan. 23 at a care center in Stoneham, Mass. She was 85. Her stepdaughter, Sharon de Novellis, said the cause was complications of a stroke.

Ms. Sloane was not quite an ingénue when she enraptured her Newport audience. She had already been on the road with the Larry Elgart band and spent a year in Germany during a brief marriage to a disc jockey who had been drafted and posted there. Growing up in Rhode Island, she had found her voice in the church choir and her métier on the radio.

When she was 14, she began singing professionally with a local band (her uncle was the saxophonist). Jazz had hooked her a few years earlier, when she heard vocalists like Fitzgerald on late-night radio shows, so different from the sock-hop fare that played during the day.

When a scout for Mr. Elgart heard her at a club in New Bedford, Mass., she was invited to tour with his band. Born Carol Morvan, she had been performing as Carol Vann. Mr. Elgart didn’t like the name, so she changed it to Sloane, after a furniture store she’d seen in New York City. Sloane (no first name), as she was known to her friends, then came up fast.



Ms. Sloane on “The Steve Allen Show” in 1961. She was also a regular guest of Johnny Carson. ABC Photo Archives/Disney, via Getty Images

She became a favorite of the piano virtuoso Oscar Peterson, who had her open for him at the Village Vanguard in New York. When he introduced her to Fitzgerald, she recalled, Fitzgerald said, “You’re the one they say sings just like me!”

Jon Hendricks, of the jazz vocal trio Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, hired Ms. Sloane to fill in on occasion when Annie Ross was unavailable. She was a regular on the television shows of Johnny Carson and Steve Allen. She played venues on both coasts, sharing the bill with comedians like Lenny Bruce, Bill Cosby and Woody Allen.

And then her rise ended.

The work, never lucrative to begin with, faded away as tastes in popular music shifted. The two albums she made for Columbia in 1962 were well received but didn’t sell, and she was dropped from the roster; she wouldn’t record again for more than a decade. A new era in pop music began in the mid-1960s, and Ms. Sloane was not to be a part of it.

By then she was barely getting by, playing the odd gig and writing reviews for DownBeat. Then, in 1968, a nightclub called the Frog and Nightgown opened in Raleigh, N.C. She was invited to perform for a week — and ended up staying in Raleigh for nearly a decade.

For the next seven years, until it closed, she performed regularly at the Frog and Nightgown while working as a secretary in the law offices of Terry Sanford, the former governor. Jazz clubs were closing all over the country in the late 1960s, and opening one in 1968 was perhaps overly optimistic, particularly in a town wrestling with segregation — the Frog and Nightgown was often targeted by the Ku Klux Klan — but it thrived for a time, and so did Ms. Sloane.

Then she was introduced to Jimmy Rowles, a gifted jazz pianist who had played with the greats but who had a drinking problem. They fell in love, and she followed him back to New York. Before long, she found herself starting the morning with a drink. She attempted suicide and finally left him, moving in with friends.

There were more setbacks in store: An old friend lured Ms. Sloane back to North Carolina when he opened a club in Chapel Hill, but it quickly failed. By the mid-1980s, she was broke again. She lost her car, and her apartment.

In a last-ditch effort to find work, she called a few club managers, including Buck Spurr, a kindhearted man who was running a jazz room in a Howard Johnson’s in Boston called the Starlight Roof. They married in 1986 and settled in Stoneham.

By 1987, Ms. Sloane was working steadily again. She found a new audience in Japan, and continued to enthrall critics at home.

In 2001, when Ms. Sloane was performing at the Algonquin in Manhattan, Stephen Holden, in a review for The New York Times, wrote, “There are no shortcuts to the serene autumnal grove from which the jazz singer Carol Sloane spins out songs of experience in a warm, slightly husky voice that swings steadily while projecting a reassuring calm.” He added, “As much as any singer of her generation” — she was then in her 60s — “Ms. Sloane understands the value of restraint.”

She conveyed “with a quiet authority,” Mr. Holden said, “the assimilated wisdom of a woman who has been there, done that and moved on.”

That same year Ms. Sloane released an album, one of nearly 30 she recorded over her lifetime. Its title: “I Never Went Away.”



Ms. Sloane, with Peter Bernstein on guitar and Ray Drummond on bass, at a concert of Duke Ellington’s music in New York in 2006. Hiroyuki Ito

Carol Anne Morvan was born on March 5, 1937, in Providence, R.I., and grew up nearby in Smithfield, one of two daughters of Frank and Claudia (Rainville) Morvan. Her parents worked in a textile mill.

In addition to Ms. De Novellis, her stepdaughter, Ms. Sloane is survived by a stepson, David Spurr, and five grandchildren. Her brief marriage to the Providence disc jockey Charlie Jefferds ended in the late 1950s. Mr. Spurr died in 2014.

In 2019, Ms. Sloane made what would be her last album, “Carol Sloane: Live at Birdland,” which was released last year. She was anxious about doing it, and also a bit anxious about the film crew that had been following her on and off for a year to make a documentary about her.

Directed by Michael Lippert, “Sloane: A Jazz Singer” is set to premiere at the Santa Fe Film Festival this month. One of its executive producers is Stephen Barefoot, once a bartender at the Frog and Nightgown (and the owner of the ill-fated club in Chapel Hill), who talked her into the project.

“There is no such thing as an easy song to sing,” Ms. Sloane said in the film. “There isn’t! You chose it because it says something to you, about love and loss. Jazz singing is so personal. It’s a very intimate conversation in a way. It’s really, ‘I’m going to tell you this story, and I’m going to tell it to you very quietly, but it’s going to have so much impact.’

“And,” she continued, “it’s to be able to convey to the audience that I have been through this. I can still remember the heartbreak, and I can tell you that it’s right here, where it was when it was fresh. And somehow I’ve survived.”

A correction was made on Feb. 3, 2023: An earlier version of this obituary misstated the name of an album Ms. Sloane released in 2001. It is “I Never Went Away,” not “I Never Left.”

Penelope Green is a reporter on the Obituaries desk and a feature writer for the Style and Real Estate sections. She has been a reporter for the Home section, editor of Styles of The Times, an early iteration of Style, and a story editor at The Times Magazine. @greenpnyt • Facebook

A version of this article appears in print on , Section B, Page 9 of the New York edition with the headline: Carol Sloane, 85, a Jazz Singer Who Found Success Twice, Dies