

Carol Sloane, graceful jazz singer for decades, dies at 85

By [Bryan Marquard](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 20, 2023, 5:27 p.m.



Carol 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/The New York Times)

Carol Sloane was only 14 and growing up outside of Providence when she began her professional singing career by accompanying an area dance band. She pocketed \$11 a week for those early gigs.

"I was independently wealthy," she told jazz critic Ralph J. Gleason in 1964. "My family let me keep the money."

During a decades-long career that at one point took a detour to a secretarial job in North Carolina, Ms. Sloane became one of the nation's memorable jazz singers, even if she sometimes found the term limiting.

“Carmen McRae and Billie Holiday are jazz singers, and I don't know why,” she told Gleason for a Globe interview. “And I am *not* a jazz singer, and I don't know why. I hate categories and all I do is sing the songs I love and the music I love.”

Ms. Sloane, who had lived in Greater Boston for many years, was 85 when she died in a care center in Stoneham on Jan. 23 of complications from a stroke, her stepdaughter, Sandra de Novellis, told The Washington Post.

“The only thing wrong with Carol Sloane the singer is that she does not sing often enough,” Globe jazz critic Bob Blumenthal wrote in 1990, when she was combining performances with hosting duties on GBH-FM shows. Her interpretive skills, he said, were “beyond reproach.”

In 1989, Globe music critic [Ernie Santosuosso](#) praised her “peerless diction and ability to live inside a lyric” while reviewing her just-released album “Love You Madly.” He added that Ms. Sloane “embraces each song as if it were a priceless gem.”

Though praise from critics and applause from audiences followed Ms. Sloane wherever she sang, she never achieved fame to match many musicians she performed with or befriended — most of them from an earlier jazz generation. Her friends included singers Ella Fitzgerald and Carmen McRae. Ms. Sloane sometimes shared the stage with bandleader Benny Goodman and pianist Oscar Peterson. She sought and took advice from the likes of Duke Ellington and Miles Davis.

“I learned this from Ella,” she would say simply, while introducing a song such as [“I Never Had a Chance.”](#)

That Ms. Sloane didn't achieve a similar iconic status “used to drive me crazy, but I don't think about it anymore,” she told the Globe in 2004, three years after she chose “I Never Went Away” as the [title song](#) of an album as a seeming answer to those who thought the spotlight on her work had faded.

“Looking back,” she said, “I feel very happy where I am.”

Ms. Sloane had appeared destined for national stardom at 24, when a pianist's unfamiliarity with the Rodgers and Hart song "Little Girl Blue" led her to begin singing it a cappella at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1961, a memorable performance that led to her first recording contract.

After she released a pair of albums in 1962, more than a dozen years elapsed before her third vinyl effort. For some of those years, she lived in North Carolina, juggling performing and secretarial work, until returning to New York and Boston.

"Her singing dark-textured, warm, and articulate, Carol Sloane personifies the mainstream jazz vocalist," Santosuosso wrote in 1976 as he hailed her first Greater Boston performance in a decade.

"I really just have always wanted to be considered one of the best," she said in an interview for "Sloane: A Jazz Singer," [a documentary](#) directed by Michael Lippert that was shown at the [Santa Fe Film Festival](#) this year.

Born in Providence on March 5, 1937, she was a daughter of Frank Morvan and Claudia Rainville Morvan, who worked for textile manufacturers. As an aspiring singer, Ms. Sloane listened to musicians on the radio such as Peggy Lee, telling the Globe in 2002 that from Lee's vocals she learned "the value of the well-placed note, delicate phrasing, sense of swing, and her loving, respectful way with a ballad."

Ms. Sloane married Charlie Jefferds, a disc jockey, in 1955, and their marriage ended amicably in divorce three years later, according to [a biography](#) on her website.

Gigs in jazz clubs, which were more numerous in that era, led to touring with the Larry Elgart Orchestra. She had taken the stage name Carol Vann, and Elgart suggested she switch to Carol Sloane.

After touring, she mixed performing on stage with secretarial jobs in New York City to pay the bills. While singing at a Pittsburgh jazz festival, she met the vocal trio Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross. Jon Hendricks asked her to occasionally join the trio to fill in when Annie Ross wasn't available.

Performances with the trio led to a big break — opening at New York's Village Vanguard for Peterson, who introduced her to Fitzgerald. Hendricks also arranged for her to sing at the 1961 Newport Jazz Festival, which launched the next stage of her career.

Ms. Sloane sang in clubs across the country, sharing the bill with comedians such as Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor, appearing on “The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson,” and appearing regularly on Arthur Godfrey’s show. With the rise in the 1960s of rock bands such as the Beatles and Rolling Stones, however, she recognized that younger audiences had moved away from jazz, never to return. The number of jazz clubs and opportunities to perform dwindled over the years. She supplemented performing with writing record reviews for DownBeat magazine.

In 1984, back in Boston for gigs, she met talent coordinator Buck Spurr, who proposed to her two years later on the bandstand of the Starlight Roof Lounge. They married at the same venue a couple of weeks later.

Their Stoneham home included shelves filled with her books, including some by E.B. White, her favorite writer.

“Music is not an obsession,” she says. There are other things that make life fascinating,” she told the Globe in 2004.

“I’ve got friends, I’ve got my cooking. Life — it’s not just music,” she said. “It is wonderful to have people you care about.”

Spurr died in 2014. Her sister, Lois Souza, died [in 2020](#). In addition to de Novellis, Ms. Sloane leaves a stepson, David Spurr, and five grandchildren.

Information about a memorial service was not available.

Ms. Sloane had hosted a radio show during some of the time she lived in North Carolina. In the late 1980s, she was for a time Ron Della Chiesa’s regular substitute on his GBH-FM jazz show.

On stage, she continued to sing with “a soft, sliding, mercurial voice — it chases the melodies she sings, and swiftly remakes them,” Whitney Balliett [wrote in a 1987](#) New Yorker magazine profile.

“I’ve always sung,” she told Balliett. “When I was 14, I got a job not far from where I lived, in Rhode Island, in one of Ed Drew’s bands.”

And she kept singing to the end, releasing her final album, “Live at Birdland,” last year.

“I’m going to sing as long as my voice holds out,” she told the Globe [in 2007](#).

“I’ve been blessed with good equipment, and I take care of it the best way I know how. I only let it sing the most beautiful songs.”

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