

THE WASHINGTON SISTERS

An interview by Toni L. Armstrong

Sandra and Sharon Washington were born in the morning hours (3:35 and 3:37 a.m.) on October 6, 1960 in Columbus, Ohio. They were born three weeks early, and spent their first month in an incubator.

In December of 1983 The Washington Sisters debuted as the opening act for the band Haresuite at Calico's, the women's coffeehouse in Columbus. They went on to play coffeehouse gigs, local benefits and colleges, and opened for other performers. They did their first festival night stage performance at NEWMR '85, and their first album, 'Understated,' produced by Teresa Trull, was released this fall on Icebergg. In December, the twins—with Melanie Monsur on keyboards—will have finished their album release tour, a 41-city trek which will take them through the Northeast, Midwest, Southwest, Florida, and the entire West Coast from Tacoma to San Diego. They will be focusing in early 1988 on university exposure, the Southeast, the Midwestern states, and as many women's and folk festivals as they can.

HOT WIRE: What was it like growing up as the Washington sisters?

SANDRA: Growing up in the Washington family—a very large, loving family—was like having dozens of siblings. In the immediate family was Sharon, myself, and an older brother, Luzern—but all [19] cousins were close, too. Both of us were interested in the outdoors. When we were young, Sharon was always ready to play pickup tag, baseball, kickball, while I was always reading. The neighborhood kids would come over and tease me about being a bookworm, and beg me to even out the baseball teams. One of the games we played at our house was "phone calls." We had, I think, five extensions at one time. Sharon and I would call each other up from different rooms in the house and pretend we were different people—the start of my illustrious booking career.

SHARON: Growing up, we both had a taste for adventure and tried daring

physical feats—such as rolling down the front hill and across the street in a trash can at the age of three, and climbing trees in the forbidden orchard and getting stuck (and caught). We were both born to perform, and by the age of five we were giving shows for the family and friends in the living room bay window. Throughout our childhood, the out-of-doors and Girl Scouts were a major influence. Dad had us camping before we were four, and we had overnight canoe trips at age ten. We joined the Girl Scouts in the second grade as Brownies, and are still both card-carrying adult scouts to this day. Neither of us has sold cookies since high school, though.

Mom was the music influence. She plays piano and organ and used to accompany church choirs. She got us enrolled in piano, which we took for two years and then stopped—much to her disappointment then. But by the time we were seniors in high school, we both wanted to pursue voice. She used some influence, and we attended Fort Hayes Fine Arts Vocational School in Columbus, studying voice. Mom has her Masters in music, and during the last couple of years has really gotten excited about our decision to pursue music.

HW: What has it been like being twins and performing? In what ways do you think it has been different than if you were non-look-alike sisters performing together, or two friends?

SANDRA: I can only assume if we were two friends working together we wouldn't have the genetic blend to our voices that family members have. When we travel, it's having family go with you—someone who knows you very well. It is hard sometimes to separate the business from our relationship as sisters; it is more than 50 percent of what we talk to each other about—which is very different than before we began working together. I miss the long sisterly conversations we used to have. Dis-

cussions about publicity, percentages, material, and sales projections aren't the conversations to "nostalgilize" as we get older. The twin thing has always been there. We are constantly mistaken for each other—always have been, probably always will be. It's no skin off our backs, unless of course it is someone one of us is crushed out on.

SHARON: Having people confuse us is just part of being identical twins. If other people take the mistake in stride and honestly try to tell us apart without a big production, we take it fine.

HW: You're both lesbians—How common do you think it is to have two siblings in a family that are gay?

SHARON: I've known three in a family. **SANDRA:** It is amazing how many women approach us after shows who are twins. I'd say, two out of three of the twins (pairs) who talk to us are both lesbians or have a brother (twin) who is gay also. It also is a skewed sample; there are probably as many gay-straight twin pairs as lesbian-lesbian twin pairs, and of course 90 percent straight-straight twin pairs.

HW: In what ways do you incorporate woman-identified—lesbian and/or feminist—material into your act? Does it change when you're doing a "straight" vs. "women's music" crowd?

SHARON: Our act is pretty much the same regardless of the audience. I feel we draw a mixed audience to begin with (though primarily lesbian). I do not feel that "lesbian" and "feminist" material can be presumed to be the same. Feminist music can speak to other issues, such as apartheid, intervention in Central America, and class issues, etc. Lesbian music, in my point of view, speaks about issues unique to lesbians, but can have appeal to those who are not lesbian—such as loving women emotionally, spiritually, and physically from a woman's point of view.

SANDRA: The fact of our sexual orientation is not the prime focus of our lives or our music. We don't always "come out" at gigs, but we do always sing the same material. Our act doesn't change with the gender or sexual orientation of the audience. We sing songs that express how we feel about situations, issues, friends, loves. I'm not much of a romantic-love songwriter, so singing pronoun-specific love songs isn't usually an issue. I am sure when and if I move toward that focus I will not hide my preference. The woman-identified material in our act is my sister and myself as we present ourselves. By being ourselves, woman-identified and performing music which is heartfelt, we are presenting the strength and grace and excitement of positive female energy.

joy themselves to seeing how we Washington Sisters fit into the industry. How we can help broaden the audience this industry touches, and how the message we are putting out there plays a part in the whole grand scheme of things. My professional goals are to learn more, possibly learn how to play another instrument, find ways to stay grounded on the road, play the Canadian festivals and outside of North America, and become more involved with AWMAC [the Association of Women's Music and Culture].

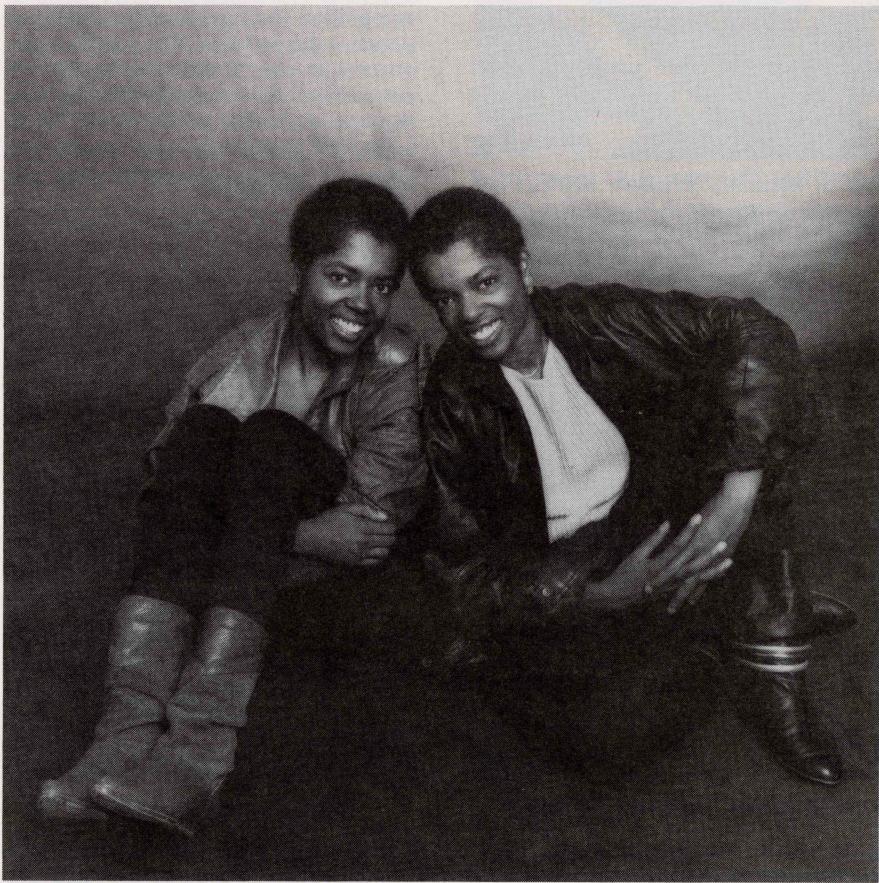
SANDRA: I definitely feel the show we do has improved over the years. I also see real changes for the good in my songwriting skills. I am able to write better melodies and more contemporary rhythms than I could, say, five years

singing backup on the album are Linda Tillery, Vicki Randle, Annie Stocking, Larry Batiste, Claytoven Richardson, and Teresa Trull—who did an excellent job producing. The album includes pop, a cappella funk, jazz swing, gospel, contemporary folk, and reggae.

SANDRA: *Understated* encompasses some of the many styles The Washington Sisters perform in concert, and it adds another dimension to our material—a band. Half the cuts are a cappella and half are backed by a wonderful rhythm section and some solo musicians. Lots of good stuff. Teresa Trull produced the record and chose the musicians—some of the finest in the Bay Area. I know many of the women in our audience will question why there are men on the album and, heaven forbid, male voices on a couple of tunes. The Washington Sisters are not forgetting who the majority of their audience is. The material we perform is meant to be felt and understood by all people who can accept diversity and welcome coalition building. It was especially important to have male voices heard on "Say No!," a song about apartheid in South Africa and the United States. This is an issue important to both men and women, and I wanted that audibly illustrated on vinyl.

HW: How did *Understated* come to be an Icebergg release?

SANDRA: Last year I called Karen [Gotzler] at Icebergg to talk about a music business concern, and she asked us if we were wanting to do an album. I said yes we were, and that we were trying to decide who to contact [at the record labels] or whether to do it on our own. She then asked if I was going to be calling Icebergg. I really hadn't called to ask them, and if I had I would have been too nervous to get to the point. I stopped and thought about what she was leading to, and after a pause I said, "Well, yes." The rest will be recording history. The real reason we went with Icebergg is that Sharon and I and Karen and Pat are all Girl Scouts. Lifers.



Irene Young

HW: In what ways do you feel you've grown as artists since you began? What are some of your professional goals?

SHARON: I feel that I've grown more confident in my ability to entertain an audience—definitely less stage frightened—and more realistic. My perception has broadened from singing for my enjoyment and the pleasure I get from making people smile, laugh, cry and en-

ago. I hope that I continue to evolve. I want to be more open, more on the edge. On a pragmatic level, I want to learn more of the theory of music, work on more albums, and eventually get my hand into producing.

HW: Your new album, *Understated*, is being released this fall?

SHARON: Yes. Some of the artists

HW: With Sandra living in Ohio and Sharon now in New Mexico, how will you rehearse and keep your career going? Why aren't you living in the same city?

SANDRA: I like to think of The Washington Sisters with Melanie Monsur as a geographical Grand Trine (Ohio, New Mexico, California). We have a chal-

lenge ahead of us to stay together and tight, and I know through the mail and phones we will make it work. We also will have on occasion retreats for planning the next step and rehearsals.

SHARON: This year Sandra and I will be on tour for 12 weeks starting September 3. We will have time to rehearse new material for future shows with Melanie, who lives in Oakland. Plus I will be spending nine weeks in Ohio this year. Tapes and telephones are another frequently tapped source. The Washington Sisters do not live in the same city because a happy person is a better performer, and I am committed to my personal life and my partner.

HW: What is your opinion of the current state of women's music? What positive developments and negative trends do you see?

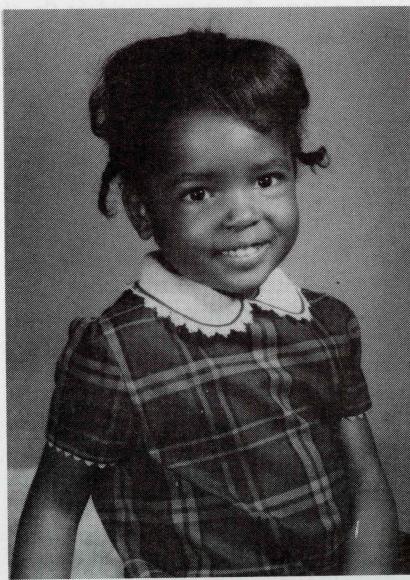
SHARON: I think that women's music is experiencing a great influx of talent right now in the market. Some of the acts are new in terms of national exposure, while nationally-known artists are

port the industry on a continual and regular basis. Clubs, production companies, coffeehouses. It is a myth that the only places are on the coasts. The middle of the country is alive and regenerating, and there are pockets which are hungry for more women's culture. Since I first became aware of women's music in 1978 I have seen a large increase in the diversity of the sound—and I love it. We are only getting better the broader we become. The surge toward professionalism in the industry is a good thing, as long as we realize professionalism does not have to be high-budget; I am not wanting to build a network of yuppie dykes that excludes the not-for-profit companies or the community groups. I wish bands could be more financially feasible. I want to see more support for theater, dance, classical music, and of course women of color.

HW: What has been your experience with racism in the women's music and culture scene?

SANDRA: The most vivid examples of

not being profitable—that outreach was expensive and no one came anyway. "We're bringing in a black performer—how come the black community won't come when we call?" I was furious. Speaking became an extreme exercise in self-control. I nearly quit the music scene altogether, but I went to Sisterfire that year and got my anger directed into determination. The political and cultural awareness is generally greater in the women's scene [than in the mainstream], though. In mainstream if we were doing our mix of political and a cappella and pop and swing, an agent would say, "It will never fly; black girls have got to sing R&B to make it." In the women's scene true R&B is not readily produced. **SHARON:** Racism in the women's music and culture scene takes as many forms as it does anywhere else. Lack of recognition and ignorance are what perpetuates the problem. Whether it's a producer who says that it's too hard to do outreach to the black community and then no one came to the show... Well, ladies, it's gonna take more than a few efforts. A whole network of trust and



The athlete at age 6.



Before singing, before the Scouts.



The bookworm at age 6.

continuing to produce and grow in new ways. I do see more of an acceptance of comedy, but women's culture is still falling short in their promotion of artists in dance and theater. I feel that it is my duty to smash the bi-coastal arrogance and educate people that the Midwest is strong in its support of women's music and culture. The two biggest women's music festivals are Michigan and Indiana.

SANDRA: There are dozens of communities all across the country who sup-

racism I see in the women's music/culture scene are cases of extreme stubbornness. I see the stubbornness on the faces and bodies when someone speaks about coalition-building or outreach. When producers talk the bottom dollar, I hear them moving away from black performers, from the "black sound." The most painful situation was at the Music Industry Conference in 1985 when, in a large group setting, women started to speak out about black women not being accepted in their communities and, thus,

mutual satisfaction must be built, and mutual satisfaction will not occur if decision-making is still in the hands of white

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ABOUT THE WRITER: Toni L. Armstrong writes a bi-weekly column called "Lesbian Music Hot Mix" in 'Chicago Outlines' newspaper. She recently got a promotion at her day (teaching) job, but probably not because of her women's music competencies.