



left The Loading Zone, I found myself in the position of having to go out and hustle employment. Actually, that's the point at which my real training and real dues-paying began. I did a lot of "casuals." Casuals are when someone hires you for the night or two nights, you learn a bunch of different songs, and after that gig is over you go your own way and pick up more work. So I sang in a lot of different situations: wedding receptions, bar mitzvahs, debutante balls. I sang standards, rock, soul. I met a lot of different musicians and was introduced to many styles of singing.

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HW: So, you're earning your living...

LT: I'm earning my living and I'm paying dues. This phrase "paying dues" is really apropos because there are times in a performer's life when certainly you contemplate college, suicide, and dishwashing. All three crossed my mind several times during the period between 1970-1976. There were times I'd play gigs with four sets and go home with \$15. I would wonder, "Why am I doing this?" I couldn't tell you why I continued to do it except I knew that it felt right for me to communicate with other people through music. I enjoyed it, other people seemed to enjoy it. I just didn't get paid very much for it.

HW: What do you try to accomplish with your music?

LT: When I first started singing I wanted to be rich and famous. That was it. It never dawned on me that maybe people have a purpose to their work. And one can have a purpose to one's work without proselytizing or being a political activist or coming out for a cause. I go on stage to perform because I really love the

Sweet Linda Divine

An Interview with Linda Tillery

by Michele Gautreaux

HOT WIRE: Linda, were you born a musician?

LINDA TILLERY: I believe I was born a musician. I think most gifted, creative people are usually, although not always, born with some kind of innate talent which has to be developed. You can't just sit around on it. I believe I was born with some kind of gift of musicianship, although I didn't know when I was younger that I would be a singer. I just knew I was really drawn to music and that music really excited me. It intrigued me even as far back as 34 years ago when I was two years old.

HW: Well, obviously you didn't sit around on it. How did your career begin?

LT: After graduating from high school, I read an ad in the San Francisco Chronicle placed by

a Berkeley rock band, The Loading Zone. They were looking for a female vocalist, as they had already signed a contract with RCA Victor and just needed a singer for the album. So I walked in with the stage pretty much set. We went to L.A., made the album, and started touring and doing a lot of major concerts.

HW: After that, did you stay with the band? What happened next?

LT: I stayed with The Loading Zone for about two years. Then I got an offer to do a solo album with CBS Records, which pretty much flopped. It was not a period in my life that I really enjoyed. I was about 20 or 21 and making the transition from teenager to adult. It was a difficult period for me. The album, Sweet Linda Divine, sold about 20,000 copies. And, having

interaction with people. My purpose is to bring as much joy, through music, to other people as I can. Joy, capital J-O-Y.

HW: You've certainly done that on the women's music circuit. Could you talk a little about how you got involved with women's music?

LT: I've been involved in the Bay Area music scene since 1969, and that means with music in the community here in general, of which I have always felt I remained a part. But there was a point in my life in which I became aware of the absence of other women who took an active role in the creation and production of music.

HW: When did this awareness begin? Was it because of a particular event, or was it some kind of consciousness-raising on your part?

LT: Well, first of all, in 1975 I got it into my head that I wanted to be a drummer. I love drummers. Musically, the part that a drummer plays in the band, I've always hooked into that. So I called up all the drummers I knew in town and asked them for spare pieces, and was able to put together a pretty funky but functional drum set. After I did that, I started practicing. One day I got a call from a woman, Peggy Stern, who had just moved here from Philadelphia. She was a pianist, classically trained. She had been a teacher and she was just beginning to play jazz. She wanted to know if I would like to get together. I thought, this is really weird. This is the first time I've ever gotten a call from a woman. It was the strangest thing that ever happened to me, a woman who played an instrument. The two of us got together one day and we jammed and we agreed there

were things we both needed to learn, and we made a commitment to work together. We got support from other musicians we knew, mostly males, and we started having jam sessions at her house. We got real into it, and even formed a band called Cats Cradle. It was the first mixed band I'd ever played in. The two of us were the leaders and we called the shots.



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Olivia Records celebrated its tenth anniversary with a bash in 1982 at Carnegie Hall including Linda, Meg, Cris, Vicki Randle, and many others.

HW: So, starting out with Peg...

LT: Then I ran into some women from Olivia. I didn't know Olivia Records from Minerva Records in 1976, but I did know some members of a band called BeBe K'Roche. The BeBes had signed a contract with Olivia and needed a producer for their album. They asked me to do it, and I said yes. I already had some pre-formed ideas about women's music and Olivia Records, and I expressed to them my concerns.

HW: Then you had heard some of women's music.

LT: I had heard of it. I hadn't participated in it. What I knew

of it was there were no black women. When, in the United States of America, someone starts a record company and there's no black music there, to me that is the strangest thing on earth. So I had those questions and I put them out. I realized I wasn't signing my life away to Olivia Records. I was just going to produce this record and be on my way. What ended up happening was that I produced the BeBes album and was asked by Teresa Trull to produce her first album, which was going to be the next project. Teresa's music was a lot closer in nature to that which I was accustomed, so I agreed to do that project. Then Olivia asked me to do an album, which came out in 1977.

So I did three albums in a row in the studio, and mine was the first album recorded by a black woman on any feminist label, as far as I know.

HW: This got you into the women's music network and you have been connected to it ever since. What's it like to work in the network? What's good and what's bad about it?

LT: In the beginning I completely submerged myself into Olivia Records and women's music because the connection I had originally made with Peggy Stern was reiterated tenfold. Now I was in an environment where every job was being filled by a woman, and it was a very empowering experience. All other things set aside, it was a time when I discovered and came to believe that anything I wanted to do, within reason, and had the capability to do, I ought to try and pursue. That was not a commitment to or understanding that I had of myself or any other woman prior to that time.

HW: So your association with Olivia Records gave you a sense

of self. OK, what's not so good about working with the network?

LT: My involvement with and my attitude towards the women's music network has definitely changed. First of all, I am not a part of the Olivia organization, nor have I been since 1979. I do perform at a lot of women's music functions. I perform at the national festivals, and at concerts sponsored by women's studies groups. But I do not consider myself to belong to any one group of people. I am very grateful to have support from people from all walks of life. My focus has definitely been on feminist concerns, but I have never, musically, been a preacher of sorts. I've never, except for two songs that I can remember, really taken up any issues. "Don't Pray For Me" (a song written by Mary Watkins in response to a particular person, Anita Bryant, who at the time was causing a great deal of difficulty through the media for gay people) was addressed to Anita Bryant and people like her. I wrote a song called "Freedom Time" which basically says it's time for us as black people, black women to take our own destiny in our hands. Obviously, we are not going to be given very much, but that is no reason to be stuck in a rut. It just means that our work will be much more difficult than need be. The obstacles are not insurmountable, and while the church has been the most dominant force in the black community (and I certainly know that my years of involvement in the church were good years for me), I think that beyond prayers there has to be a time of action. So I was trying to say all that in the song.

HW: You perform at women's music functions, but you don't consider yourself to be solely

a women's music performer. Is there pressure to identify yourself that way and disassociate yourself from other types of music and musicians?

LT: I think earlier on there was certainly that type of pressure. I think the attitude which most disturbed me before and might possibly still cause my feathers to get ruffled is this term "women's music." What does that mean? I've asked people, what does "women's music" mean to you? Do you think of specific performers? Do you think of a certain style of music? Are you aware that there is not only a message to be given but a tradition to be passed on, and that tradition for each of us might be completely different? Do you understand that as a woman who is a performer and musician, I come from a real different place than Holly or Meg? And they're really OK, but I'd like you to hear me as I present myself and not as you think I should be. I'm not a folksinger, my background is not in country and western music. I grew up with jazz and gospel and rhythm

and blues. Those are the styles of music I feel most comfortable with. I don't ever wish or expect to change to accommodate any audience. I remember a shocking experience that happened when I was working with a woman at the Olivia office. I brought down some records that I wanted to listen to. I put on an album by the Commodores. There was a woman there who got very uncomfortable. I said, "What's wrong with you?" She said, "That music really makes me uptight; it's cockrock." I said, "Well, what do you mean it's 'cockrock'?" First of all, it's not rock at all. What are you saying? What are you implying?" She objected to it because it's speaking to my cultural experience, if not to my experience as a woman. I'm not just a woman. I'm a Negro, a Black woman. I need to hear stuff by other people like me.

HW: You said you haven't been associated with Olivia since 1979. You were involved, however, with the 1983 Carnegie Hall concert. Could you talk about how that concert felt and



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what it meant to you?

LT: I had a great time. I got to sing with two of my favorite singers, Vicki Randle and Shelby Flint. We had a great vocal section. I also enjoyed participating in an event which commemorated ten years of survival for a real maverick movement. Whoever expected women to survive in business for that long, in an industry where all



Irene Young

Linda in 1978. She has played drums on several familiar albums, including those of Teresa Trull and Mary Watkins.

the odds are against you? It was so exciting to be a part of the celebration of the survival of women's music, of Olivia Records, Meg Christian, Cris Williamson, Teresa Trull, Mary Watkins, Linda Tillery. We've all been part of that. I feel that in certain ways I have served as a role model for other women who may have at times felt they really don't have what it takes to define their own lives, to take their power in their own hands and go after what they believe in. I think all of us have had an effect on many, many women. That's a wonderful thing. My life has been really changed by women I've met through the years. I've met some remarkable women, brilliant women.

HW: In discussing the survival of women's music, do you think we need to talk about the fact that overwhelmingly it's lesbian energy, creativity, and commitment that makes it all possible?

LT: It's understood. That's how I feel about it.

HW: You're making a new album and are very excited about the fact that you are financing the project yourself. What made you decide to do that?

LT: I think a lot of artists are choosing to produce their own records, because there's not a lot of money around. I decided that I wanted to raise the money for my next album, and I've been actively pursuing that goal for over a year. I'm going into the studio and my new album will be out in the spring. It will be distributed by Redwood Records, but the studio part is being produced and paid for with money I have raised from contributions and investments. It has been an exciting, frustrating, wonderful experience. I've learned a lot.

HW: How did you raise the money?

LT: I circulated a fund-raising flyer at gigs. I did a seven-week tour last fall during which I mentioned that the flyers were available. I talked to people on the phone. I had them call me collect, write to me.

HW: Ordinary people, people like me?

LT: Sure, if you were interested in donating to or investing in my album. I have developed a fund-raising packet that I send to anyone interested. It has as much information about my album as possible. I've gotten tremendous response. Even if not monetary response, I've gotten such great emotional support, I can't believe it. And I've made contact with many, many women of color who support my music.

HW: How much will it cost?

LT: It's going to cost about \$30,000 altogether. Which is maybe one tenth of what somebody like Rod Stewart spends on an album. I'm talking about the whole thing: musicians, artwork, studio costs. It's expensive. There won't be that many times in my life when I'll see \$30,000 flash before my face. But the end result is a record, called Secrets, representing where Linda Tillery is today.

HW: I would like to talk more in depth about the role of black women in the network. What is our history in women's music? What can we contribute? What is our potential?

LT: If you were to gather together all of the albums which have been released under the guise of "women's music," you would probably find there has been limited involvement on the part of black women. I know Sweet Honey in the Rock, Mary Watkins, and I have records. Very few black feminists have been recorded, which doesn't mean that there are not black women making music. That's exclusive of Casselberry and DuPree, Edwina Lee Tyler & A Piece of the World, Women of the Calabash, Toshi Reagan. There will be an album by a woman named Deidre McCalla. These women are out there and because of lack of money it's harder in the beginning for us to be noticed, to be recognized as who we are. Which is not to say that we need not try. It just means it's going to be harder. It's been seven years since I made Linda Tillery. That's a long time. Our history in women's music as black women I see similarly to the history of black women in music in general. It's impossible to discuss contemporary American

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