

20 Feet from Stardom

Kings of Rhythm. The Blossoms. Lady Grinning Soul. Gil Friesen. Brown Sugar. Darlene Love. Phil Spector

Words Chris Sullivan

IF YOU'VE EVER sung along with the backing vocals on a lauded tune, as opposed to the lead, you're not alone. Consider Ray Charles's 'What'd I Say', David Bowie's 'Young Americans' and the Rolling Stones' 'Gimme Shelter' – all fine, enduring recordings improved immeasurably by backing singers.

"People love the backing singers," says Janice Pendarvis, who has sung with Bowie, Steely Dan and the O'Jays, among many others. "Just think of Lou Reed's 'Walk on the Wild Side' with that line: 'And the coloured girls go doo do doo do doo...'. There's a power to these girls who stand on stage and sing. You lose your own persona because you're trying to mesh your sound with the other voices. That is awesome."

Of course, many would say the very thing that defines 'backing' vocalists is their distance from the limelight but, as new documentary *20 Feet from Stardom* illustrates, it can be undeservedly far. Director Morgan Neville says the subject matter wasn't immediately obvious. "The

idea came from my producer Gil Friesen, who ran A&M Records for 20 years," he says. "He'd gone to a Leonard Cohen concert, smoked a joint and got fixated on Cohen's backing singers. He was wondering what their story was, so he mentioned it to me. And as I've done a lot of music docs and I'm a bit of a record geek, it seemed worth looking at."

Neville has actually directed dozens of music documentaries, like *Search and Destroy: Iggy & the Stooges' Raw Power* (2010), *Johnny Cash's America* (2008) and *Respect Yourself: the Stax Records Story* (2007). On the face of it, he seemed the right one to finally reveal backing singers as the invisible heroes of the industry.

"The weird thing is there were no books, websites or articles about them," he says. "They are shockingly invisible and, as such, that became the story. It's tough, because if you say, 'Name songs with great backup vocals,' most people can come up with just a few. Your brain isn't programmed to think about them. You watch footage of Ray Charles and

see them but no one had catalogued it. It was like retraining your eye and ear to get used to looking for them. And I only touched the surface."

Most backing vocalists before the 1970s not only weren't photographed, they weren't even credited. As anyone who has worked in a studio will attest, artists or producers will frequently ask backing vocalists to improvise, then perhaps harmonise with that ad-lib. Often this will become the hook, the melody we sing along to, the one that sells the song. To not credit that artist or withhold their dues is to say that providing the winning refrain for a huge pop song doesn't really matter.

"You end up doing all the hard work on a the song," explains Darlene Love, who sang for Phil Spector, the Beach Boys and Elvis, to name a small few. "The musicians come in, play their part, then go home. When we first started, the producers depended on us. We loved it. We were really creating something. It was our job to make them sound good." >



Mick Jagger and Lisa Fischer, 1995



Claudia Lennear and David Bowie, Sigma Studios, 1974

Love and her colleagues in the 1960s and 70s don't themselves recall who sang on what, when and where. "You could do three or four sessions a day – Sinatra in the morning, Sam Cooke in the afternoon, Sonny & Cher at night. And we never got residuals until 18 years ago. But you know what? Good things come to good people! I think 50 years ago they didn't think we were important. They found out; like anything else, over time people were interested to find out who was singing in the background."

Love was born Darlene Wright in southwest Los Angeles in 1941; she was already singing professionally with girl group the Blossoms while in high school and would later sing back up on Sinatra's 'That's Life', Betty Everett's 'The Shoop Shoop Song (It's in His Kiss)' and a lot of James Brown material. Like many 20th-century American vocalists, Love started singing at church. "My father

was a minister," she says. "We grew up in church the first 15 years of our lives. I didn't have a choice but to sing."

The Blossoms were some of the first black backing vocalists. "[White-girl backup singers] couldn't do anything without sheet music," says Love. "We'd walk in and people would wonder what we were doing there. Once we explained we weren't the domestics, they'd hand us the sheet music and we'd hold onto it and pretend to read it."

"It came to a point," Stevie Wonder says in the film, "They needed singers who were free to express themselves and didn't need to sing exactly what was on the paper." Thus, the black backing singer's rise is also the rise of rock'n'roll soul, and Love epitomises the milieu.

"We sounded really white until Darlene came in," says original Blossom Fanita James. "She brought that raw gospel sound and everyone wanted us."

In 1962 the Blossoms attracted the attention of one Phil Spector, leader of the Teddy Bears, who in 1959, aged 19, penned, performed and sold a million copies of 'To Know Him is to Love Him', inspired by the inscription on his father's tombstone. As an apprentice to Lieber and Stoller, he co-wrote 'Spanish Harlem' for Ben E King, played guitar on the Drifters' 'On Broadway', then formed three groups, one of which, the Crystals, hit number one with Gene Pitney's 'He's a Rebel'. But the Crystals didn't sing a note, and didn't even hear it until it topped the charts. Spector had pulled in the Blossoms but credited the Crystals, who could never match Love's throaty delivery and thus mimed the song for the rest of their career.

"It was my first lead vocal, I was 18," says Love. "It hurt when people said how great the Crystals were on it. I was mad. Then I sang 'He's Sure the Boy I Love',



Jack Nitzsche, Darlene Love and Phil Spector, Gold Star Studios, 1963

my song, that I worked hard on – and he did it again! He credited the Crystals and it was a hit. But I did a lot of songs for Phil that came out under different names. He was building a monument to himself. It was always a Phil Spector session, not Darlene Love or the Ronettes, or whatever. He was great to work for in the early days but he was so successful that he became a jerk.”

She’s not exaggerating, as Neville says. “For years he didn’t pay her, so she sued him in 1999 and won, but was only able to recoup 10 years of royalties. Phil kept Darlene in a box. Her best stuff was coming out, but not under her name. He could have made more allowing her to be the star she is, but he just couldn’t do it.”

As Bruce Springsteen says in the film, “It’s a bit of a walk, from back by the drums. That walk to the front is complicated.”

But many backing singers don’t want the responsibility and complications that come with being the frontperson. Lisa Fischer has backed the Rolling Stones in the studio and on tour since 1989, topped 1991’s R&B charts with ‘How

Can I Ease the Pain’ and then won the Grammy for the best performance by an R&B artist. “I love singing backing vocals and really enjoy being a part of the team,” she says. “Even as a child, I loved to see the likes of Chaka Khan

‘HER BEST STUFF WAS COMING OUT, BUT NOT UNDER HER NAME’

and Earth, Wind & Fire, but still focused on the backing vocals. That is what I’ve always wanted to do.”

Neville points out that the frontman is a different beast, one who craves the limelight – while the backing singer is more of a team player. “Some singers

don’t have that ambition,” he explains. “To be a backing singer needs a different mentality, you have to support the lead and not take over. But solo success is about luck and timing, it’s not about talent, and it’s different for everybody. I had a montage of singers giving their reasons why they didn’t cross over and they gave excuses: my A&R man got busted on coke, or the studio burnt down – and it’s all bad luck and timing.”

Of course, some people would say that if you want to see the price of fame, hang out with a famous person.

“I’d love to be financially set up, but I couldn’t go for that other part,” says Fischer. “I like to be able to walk down the street, go shopping, sit in the park. I see Mick, Sting and Tina; in order to walk outside and do what normal people do, they need a bodyguard. I was on tour once with the Rolling Stones, and Keith [Richards] got up at 4am on a beautiful Sunday morning just so he could take a walk on his own. I think those who start young, like Mick [Jagger] don’t know a lot else. I was in my early thirties when I had success, so I had something to >

compare that to. If I'd started aged 18, I might have a different perspective."

"A lot of great backing singers don't feel comfortable taking that leap," adds Springsteen, "which is a conceptual leap and not physical. They don't have the narcissism or ego that it takes."

Take Claudia Lennear, for example. "You don't have to be able to lead – but if you can, that's another skill set," she explains in her gentle Californian accent. "But I think to be a really sought-after backing singer, you have to, first of all, understand your environment."

Lennear began in Ike and Tina Turner's Ikettes. He called her out of the blue and asked her to join. Tina and the Ikettes were a sexy combo: skimpy mini dresses, Cleopatra hairstyles and crazed synchronised dance routines. "The girls were fantastic," reports Bette Midler in the film. "Tina was a force of nature but the girls were no slouches either."

"Ike was a father figure to me," says Lennear. "And before that, a very special person in rhythm and blues. He made the first rock'n'roll record, 'Rocket 88', with the Kings of Rhythm. But Ike had a system – if you didn't match up to the standard he wanted, or you hit a wrong note, you'd get a fine. It was just how business worked at that time among African-American bands. Spector did the same thing. If you're a professional and you do make an error, then he's going to notice it as a band leader."

Lennear's career coincided with the British Invasion: bands that immediately cottoned on to the idea of black-girl backing singers, and she was the catch of the day. "It was 1968," says Neville, "the year the Stones recorded in the US for the first time." This new wave of British bands, mostly former mods or blues fans, found themselves in the US, playing and hanging with their heroes. It was only natural to pull in backing singers and give their sound more 'soul'. But did they simply purchase that soul? 'Tainted Love' singer and Marc Bolan's ex-wife Gloria Jones says backing singers were saved by the UK rock fraternity.

"I wouldn't have known who Robert Johnson, John Lee Hooker or Muddy Waters were if Jagger hadn't explained to me," smiles Lennear. "I grew up in Rhode Island, the music we were getting there was mostly like Bobby 'Blue'



Darlene Love with the Blossoms and Marvin Gaye, the *TAMI Show*, 1964

Bland. I didn't know about the Delta blues until I met Mick and Keith. They gave it a spin and sold it back to us.

"The atmosphere was one of mutual admiration that produced incredible results," says Lennear, who also sang with Humble Pie and Joe Cocker. "I loved working with Joe. It was one big

'I DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT THE DELTA BLUES UNTIL I MET MICK AND KEITH'

party on stage. Someone would play something and we'd follow. That was the greatest part about singing with the British rockers. They gave us freedom. Nobody sat us down in the studio and told us, 'You sing this, you sing that'.

You just listened to the track in the headphones and sang what you felt."

Bill Wyman says Jagger's 'Brown Sugar' lyrics were inspired by Lennear, who the Stones met when touring with Turner in 1969. Lennear chuckles. "I've just accepted that. I was a friend at the time and everyone attributed it to me; deep down in my heart I believe it. I was about 18 or 19." Bowie also wrote 'Lady Grinning Soul' from *Aladdin Sane* about Lennear. "We were good friends," she says. "Later people were saying, 'Did you know David wrote this song about you?' and I couldn't believe it. He had always said I'd influenced him. Maybe it would have been nice if they'd written a song for me to sing!"

Lennear graced the pages of August 1974's *Playboy*, in a spread called, aptly, 'Brown Sugar'. "It was wonderful to work with Hugh Hefner," she recalls. "They were great times – women's lib, burn your bra, experimentation. *Playboy* was one of the best decisions I ever made. After all, it's all about exposure, no?" But Lennear and her colleagues added something to music far removed from the pages of *Playboy*, something



Merry Clayton, 1971

that had taken centuries to gestate, a certain indefinable something that came straight out of the bible-belting churches of the American South.

“The backup came out of the church and was secularised and stuck on the stage,” says Springsteen. “There’s that guy out front testifying and the crowd *amening* back. David Bowie called on that sound for *Young Americans*. These singers bring this world with them.”

All the vocalists featured heavily in *20 Feet from Stardom* have experienced different career paths – most having fallen foul of budget cuts and falling record sales. “It’s not a level playing field,” says Sting in the film. “It’s not about talent, it’s about circumstance.”

The once-sidelined Darlene Love’s career hit the pan and she cleaned houses to earn a crust. After hearing

her song on the radio while cleaning a toilet, she moved to New York and her career was resuscitated, in part due to the patronage of David Letterman. After her second album stalled, Lisa Fischer became disillusioned with life out front and turned her back on a solo career. She remains one of the most respected and successful backing singers in the world. Merry Clayton, who sang so impeccably on the Stones’ ‘Gimme Shelter’, released three albums, sang lead on the Blackbyrds’ ‘Rock Creek Park’ and still does the odd session. Claudia Lennear had a record contract and sang ‘Everything I Do Gonna be Funky’ but, with a daughter to care for, ducked out and now teaches college literature and grammar in California. “I came to a fork in the road and music wasn’t in it,” she says. To this day she regrets quitting.

The effect of *20 Feet from Stardom* is already being felt and the girls are, at last, receiving long-overdue attention, respect and adulation. Darlene Love, Merry Clayton, Judith Hill and Lisa Fischer sang the US national anthem at this year’s Rose Bowl.

“It has been a wonderful experience for all of us,” concludes Lennear, “and I speak to Gloria Jones, Merry Clayton and Lisa Fischer all the time and we all have the same sentiment. It’s all music when you boil it down; you’re not trying to be the lead singer, you’re a backing singer, someone who collaborates, who blends, who can produce something that will affect someone emotionally.” ■

20 Feet from Stardom is out on 28 March
twentyfeetfromstardom.com