

# THE CARDELLA DI MILO STORY

by Ray Astbury



Cardella De Milo, circa late 1950s. Courtesy of the Billie Holiday Collection, Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

**W**hen Cardella De Milo died on 5th January, 2003, *Blues & Rhythm* was the only specialist music magazine to report the fact and that very briefly – and not entirely accurately! The purpose of this article is to provide a fuller picture of an artist who, though by no means a major figure, played a not insignificant part in the history of rhythm and blues.



Cardella Smith was the daughter of Douglas and Roberta Smith and was born on 15th March, 1930 in Watunga, Oklahoma. The family moved first to Arizona and then to Richmond, California. She



Oakland Tribune 19th March, 1953.



Oakland Tribune 2nd April, 1965.

said that she began to sing at the age of thirteen and began her formal professional singing career while still in High School. She married Curtis Thornton and it was as Cordella Thornton, 'Queen of the Blues', that she appeared at Slim Jenkins' club in Oakland in March/April 1953.

By the time she made a return appearance there in October of the following year she had become Cordella DeMilo. Her first record appeared in 1955. Backed by a band including Johnny Guitar Watson she recorded two titles for the RPM label, 'Lonely Girl' and 'Ain't Gonna Hush' - the latter was an answer song to Joe Turner's 'Honey Hush', recorded for Atlantic in 1953.

Since RPM did not bring her back into the studio it can be presumed that the record did not sell in large numbers.

I have found no further trace of her career until 1961 when she recorded for Republic ('Lies'/Mama, Tell Me What To Do): presumably she had continued to work as a club singer as she did through the 1960s.

There are references to her working at clubs in Fresno in June and August 1963, Tucson in September of that year and in January and February of 1964, back at Slim Jenkins' in April and May 1964

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Tucson Daily Citizen 14th February, 1964

(when, according to the *Oakland Tribune* of 10th April, 1964, Slim thought "that she's developed into a versatile singer and is vastly improved from the time he booked her as a newcomer"), and again in Oakland in April 1965. A somewhat incoherent piece in the *Pasadena Star-News* of 24th December, 1971 on her appearance there (with 'the sensational Paul Peters and his combo') at the end of 1971 reported that 'Miss Di Milo is an internationally famed vocalist in the tradition of Ella Fitzgerald

with an extensive repertoire which holds her audience spellbound. She has appeared in top clubs in Canada, Hawaii and Japan plus Copacabana (and many more national and international), Pink Pussy Cat in Hollywood and Red Fox (sic) in Beverly Hills. She was in the movie 'Mad, Mad, Mad World' and has many television and radio credits'.

I know of no evidence for her appearance in 'Mad, Mad, Mad World', but she did begin to appear on TV and in films from 1973.

In that year she appeared in a couple of episodes of the TV comedy 'Sanford And Son' and also in the film 'Blackenstein'. Along with veteran film composer Lou Frohman she is credited with the music of the film and she appeared briefly as a night-club singer in the well known Los Angeles club the Parisian Room, singing a song which



clubs as The Executive Club, The California Club and many other clubs throughout Los Angeles. She served as a columnist for *The Scoop* and several newspapers in the Los Angeles area' (sic, passim). In 1977 she made her last record, for the Claridge label, which coupled 'Mr. Everything' and 'Gimme Whatcha Promised Me', both produced by Lee Rodgers and Prentiss Anderson. The latter title was reissued, backed by its instrumental version, in 1982 on Lee Rogers' D-Town label. It is said (<http://sdcenternetics.blog.com/989487/>) that the Claridge 'single managed to break into *Billboard's* R&B Top 100', but this is not borne out by Joel Whitburn's 'Top R & B Singles 1942-1988'.

She continued to play small parts in films – in 'Penitentiary' (1979) and 'Penitentiary III' (1987), where she was a 'female guard', and after having a heart by-pass operation in 1988 she also appeared in 'Street Wars' (1994) – I have not found what role she played.

All three films were directed by Jamaa Fanaka. Finally, in 1999 she played Ella Fitzgerald in the TV film 'Pirates Of Silicon Valley'.

I assume she must have sung at least one song in that role but do not know what. It is also claimed in her My Space biography that she appeared in films directed by Eddie Murphy and Ted Turner but I have not been able to identify these.

There is no doubt more to be said about her career but I hope at least to have shown that her passing merited more than silence in almost all the magazines that deal with blues, r&b and soul music.

### Sources

The biography at <<http://www.myspace.com/cardellademilo>> also contains information on her activities outside the entertainment business.

The Sterling Harrison quotation comes from Skip Heller, 'Roll With Me, Sterling' <<http://www.laweekly.com/music/music/roll-with-me-sterling/11403/>>.

The D-Town site on MySpace <<http://www.myspace.com/officialdowntownrecords>> has a couple of pictures of her.

**Label shots and adverts courtesy of Ray Astbury.**



was probably entitled 'You Should Be Thankful'. It is presumably also she who is heard singing over the opening credits on the song, 'I Can't Find No One To Love Me' (apparently written by Que Martyn). In 1974 she appeared as 'Bystander' in 'Baby Needs A New Pair Of Shoes' and in 1975 as 'Mrs. Edwards' in Rudy Ray Moore's 'Dolemite'.

In 1982 when Rudy Ray Moore filmed his live show at Blueberry Hill in Los Angeles, Cardella DeMilo was the MC. This seems to have been a role she regularly performed at this time.

When Sterling Harrison relocated to Los Angeles in 1977 'he made a valuable friend in Cardella De Milo, a singer and actress. De Milo, although still singing, was by now a local soul impresario'. "She got me jobs around town at places like the Parisian Room, the Name of the Game, all those places."

Her My Space biography relates that 'Cardella hosted and awarded many artists at the Famous Parisian Room and her show Rising Star, in Los Angeles for more than ten years, and also wowed the crowds at such