

Profile: Melba Moore 2003 NBTF Co-Chair

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Melba Moore has embarked on yet another new adventure by releasing her first ever gospel recording.

"I'm Still Here," written and produced by Shirley Murdock and her husband, Dale Degrot, and several top-notch songwriters, promises to be worth the 10-year wait, and an awesome musical testimony of her trials and triumphant return to the elite inner circle of the artistic elements of this universe.



Moore

She also has been playing to standing-room-only audiences around the country for the past four years with "Sweet Songs of the Soul," her two-act one-woman play with music. She plans to bring the play to Broadway.

Moore began her singing career in the groundbreaking musical "Hair," where she originated the role of Dionne. During her 18 months in the show, she eventually replaced Diane Keaton, becoming the first black actress to replace a white actress in a lead role on Broadway.

Directly on the heels of "Hair," came the role of Lutie Belle, Gussiemae Jenkins in "Purdie," the role that won her a Tony Award for best supporting actress in a musical, again making her the first black actress to do so.

Her credits include "The Melba Moore/Clifton Davis Show," the miniseries "Ellis Island," R&B and pop hits "This Is It" and "You Stepped Into My Life," and her Grammy-nominated signature song, "Lean On Me," composed by Van McCoy.

Her 1990 recording of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" was instrumental in getting the song entered into the Congressional record as the official African-American national anthem.

Moore's most recent triumph was a very successful run at the Victoria Theater in the N.J.P.A.C. production of "Your Arm's Too Short to Box With God," the Tony Award winning gospel musical written by Alex Bradford and Micki Grant.

Moore is deeply spiritual, seeking daily wisdom from the Bible. She is an ardent advocate for the rights of children, which resulted in her creating the Melba Moore Foundation for Abused and Neglected Children.

The multi-faceted artist/philanthropist is always reaching deeper, pressing harder, ever challenging herself, keeping at the front of her mind, that hers is a calling and a ministry from God, for God, and to God, not show business.

'Doo Wop' brings greats to life

BY T. KEVIN WALKER
THE CHRONICLE

Jackie Taylor said she doesn't like to be bogged down with all the emotions that high expectations can bring. So she doesn't have expectations. The veteran theater writer, director and producer said she just puts out the best work that she possibly can and then lets audiences decide its fate.

But expectations are through the roof for "Doo Wop Shoo Bop," the musical that Taylor's Chicago-based Black Ensemble Theatre will bring to the National Black Theatre Festival next month. The last time a Taylor production was staged at the festival - 2001's "The Jackie Wilson Story...My Heart is Crying, Crying" - it set festival records, selling out the Stevens Center for a straight week. When the Jackie Wilson musical returned to Winston-Salem the following year, it was a sellout once again. The enthusiastic thumbs-up from NBTF crowds inspired Taylor to take the Wilson play on the road. The tour was a hit at every stop, including the famed Apollo Theatre in Harlem.

"Doo Wop Shoo Bop" uses the same formula that made the Wilson show a blockbuster. There is a cast of talented actor/singers who can fool even the most keen music lovers with their dead-on versions of songs. There is a resurrecting of a musical era and the stars that made that era great. And thrown in amid all of it are the stories of their highs and lows and joys and pains.

"Doo Wop Shoo Bop" is right on the same plane as "Jackie Wilson," Taylor said recently by phone from Chicago. "The (NBTF) audience is the most sophisticated theater audience in the country, and I expect the audience will be just as thrilled by this production."

"Doo Wop Shoo Bop" has already been tried and tested again and again. The Black Ensemble Theatre first staged the musical in 1995. It has been brought back to life several times since then. Written by Taylor and Jimmy Tillman, "Doo Wop Shoo Bop" features a cast of nine that will seem like a cast of dozens. The actors go through several wardrobe and octave changes to become more than 15 doo wop-era musical talents. Legends such as The Shirelles, The Platters, The Moonglows, The Chantels, The Skyliners, Dinah Washington and, yes, Jackie Wilson, will be brought to life in such a way that Taylor predicts that audience members will swear that the actors are lip-synching. But they are not.

The actors had to study video and audio tapes of the performers in order to absorb every vocal nuance and stage performance detail.

"The audience is going to think they are listening to the actual groups because we did not want (the actors) to interpret what they think the person should sound like. We wanted them to sound just like the performers."

Ngina James said the results have been well worth the challenge she faced of trying to mimic the pure innocence in the voice of Shirley Owens, the lead singer of The Shirelles, whose hits included "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?" and "Soldier Boy."



Photo courtesy of the Black Ensemble Theatre

Actors portray the group Shep & The Limelights, whose hits included "Daddy's Home."

"The biggest compliment is when people come up to me and say, 'You sound like the real thing,'" said James, who caught the acting bug after getting burned out in her public relations job. James also plays The Platters' Zola Taylor and other characters in the musical.

James is only 28, so much of the music she performs on stage was foreign to her when she

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Venue:
R.J. Reynolds Auditorium

Schedule:
Aug. 5-8 at 8 p.m.; Aug. 9 at 3 p.m. and 8 p.m.

Price:
\$35

won a spot in the cast. She said she is now a fan of the doo wop era and is enamored of the artists who scaled many mountains in order to make memorable music.

"When I learn a song, I feel like I am learning a part of that person," she said.

John Steven Crowley knows much of the music in "Doo Wop Shoo Bop" like the back of his hand. One of the oldest members of the cast, the silky-voiced Crowley grew up in the 1950s and '60s.

"This is the music my parents would sit and listen to," he said.

Crowley also wears many hats in the produc-