



DOING WHAT SHE LOVES MOST

**Barbara Shorts
reflects on a
memorable
career in the
entertainment
business**

By Dean M. Shapiro, Senior Editor

PHOTO COURTESY OF BARBARA SHORTS

Growing up in the 17th Ward of New Orleans' Carrollton neighborhood, Barbara Shorts was surrounded by music at an early age. Her mother was a leading singer in the women's choir of the church her family belonged to, and world-renowned gospel star, Mahalia Jackson, had family members who lived on the same block of the street where Barbara's parents owned a sweet shop in a laundromat.

Recalling a day when Jackson was singing at Priestly Junior High School which was directly across the street from her parents' business, Barbara said, "Oh my God, that was such a great experience. I was still a young girl when that happened but my eyes just bugged out and I couldn't believe that I was listening to her. I would say I got some of my inspiration from her."

And then, referring to her mother, Bertha Shorts, she said, "I never met a woman with so much power in her voice. She went around and performed at different churches. I guess that's what happened to me. She gave me the big, strong contralto voice that I have."

Other musicians living in the neighborhood at that time also included The Meters' bass player, George Porter, the late blues singer Marva Wright, gospel bandleader and organist Sammy Berfect and Ellis Marsalis and his musical family.

Influenced by these role models and the experience she acquired singing in her church's youth choir and the choruses of the schools she attended, Barbara later became one of the founding members of the Gospel Soul Children chorus, winners of a 2022 Grammy Award for their "We Are" album with Jon Batiste.

In her later years she embarked on a singing career that took her all over New Orleans and up to New York and eventually to a tour of Europe with her own band. She also had key roles in the Vernel Bagneris musical "One Mo' Time" and its sequel, "Further Mo'."

Today, at 75 and proudly billing herself at "The Legendary Barbara Shorts," she is still performing although not as frequently as in years past. But she is not about to give up her passion anytime soon. "I've got the skills. I am not a rookie," Barbara said. "I have prepared myself for this business. I am going to keep on doing what I love doing; singing, acting, entertaining and making people happy.

"I get respect and encouragement from the people who hear me and know me," Barbara continued. "Things were a little slow for me for a while but now it's

beginning to pick up. I've been so busy lately. My phone has been ringing and I have an agent who contacts me for film and commercials."

As the youngest of five girls and an older sister to three boys born to Bertha and James Henderson Shorts, Barbara's talent was recognized early in her life. When her mother bought a piano, Barbara was the one who was expected to learn on it.

"It's like, out of all the children that my mother had, she bought that piano was for me to have piano lessons," Barbara recounted. "Anybody in the family could have played it but I was the one who she chose to be taking those lessons." And even though she, admittedly, never became fully proficient at it, she has a piano in her home today.

"The piano is my tool, my instrument, she explained. "I use it to create new music, vocalize and practice. It helps me tune up or learn a new song."

Barbara sang as well as acted throughout her school years and she also sang in church choirs in her youth. When she finished high school she studied under the late Ty Tracy at the NORD Theatre. She also studied under John O'Neill at the CAC Theatre and with Anthony Bean at his namesake theatre company as well.

"I was one of the original Gospel Souls who went to First Emmanuel Baptist Church with Albert Hadley to work with the youth choir, Barbara said. "My job was to warm up voices with vocal exercises and work with the alto section. They eventually became the Gospel Soul Children. We didn't know that the group would still exist today and would have grown as much as it did. We played a major role during the time we were just getting it started."

Following high school graduation she took a few years off to perform locally before going on to Southern University at New Orleans and earning her degree in Music Education, becoming the first one in her family to graduate college.

However, she never went into teaching, despite being qualified to do so. A higher calling was beckoning her - the promise of



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BARBARA SHORTS



a career as a professional singer. Backed up by a band led by trumpeter Jamil Sharif, she spent several years touring Western Europe and Australia, performing for audiences that enjoyed the American blues and gospel genres.

It was her friend and fellow singer, the late Lady BJ Crosby, who encouraged Barbara to audition for a role in the "One Mo' Time" production that featured indigenous New Orleans music. The audition went well and Barbara was given the leading role of Big Bertha Williams in New Orleans and later Off-Broadway at the Village Gate in New York City.

She also performed as the evil witch in "The Wiz" with the New Orleans Philharmonic Orchestra and shared the



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stage with the Cincinnati Ballet Company under the direction of singer/songwriter Carmen De Leon. She also had some performances in Las Vegas.

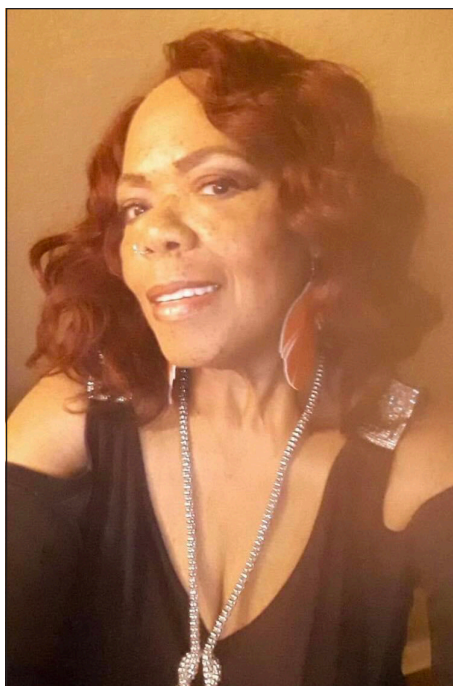
Barbara's singing career was on a roll during those years she was performing in "One Mo' Time" and barnstorming throughout Europe with her band. However, it all came crashing down like the Twin Towers when the tragic events on September 11, 2001 occurred.

"I was doing well," Barbara lamented. "I did a lot of work traveling abroad and when 9-11 happened some of my concerts were canceled. I was afraid to travel as well. I was really looking forward to a performing career but I wasn't getting much work and I had to get a regular job."

The job she took on was for dealing blackjack and other card games at the Harrah's Casino in downtown New Orleans. It wasn't the career she had chosen or prepared for in college but, for 13 years, it paid her bills. And it had its advantages as well. Several times it gave her the opportunity to perform in the Harrah's Theater, one of which paired her with her former neighbor, Marva Wright.

"Marva and I headlined that night. We were on the billboard and it was my first time on a billboard. I was so proud of that moment," she recalled.

Bringing her story up to the present, Barbara said, "I've been focusing lately on my original music. I frequent the New



Orleans Jazz Museum a couple of times a year and I really enjoy that." When she performs locally she is backed up by her band, Blue Jazz, led by pianist Larry Sieberth.

Barbara enjoys reminiscing with pride about the role she played in the formation of the Gospel Soul Children which celebrated its 50th anniversary several years ago. She was one of three of the founders who were present at the celebration. "When they call us, we come," she said. "We are like a family."

In recent years she had a major role in the musical titled "Crowns," directed by Tommye Myrick at Le Petit Theatre. The musical is a gospel tribute to the stylish hats Black women wear to church.

She has also dropped a single called "Love on the Run," based on a true story from when she was 15 and had a 19-year-old boyfriend who took advantage of her youthful naivete. The song has gotten many hits on YouTube and is also on Apple, Spotify and other online outlets.

And so it goes for Barbara Shorts after eight decades of performing. As she concluded, "I have a saying that goes 'I am glad God chose me to be me because I wouldn't want to be anyone else. Thank you Father for choosing me.'"

Barbara Shorts is available for singing at weddings, festivals and any other special events and occasions. Contact her at iambarbarashorts@yahoo.com