

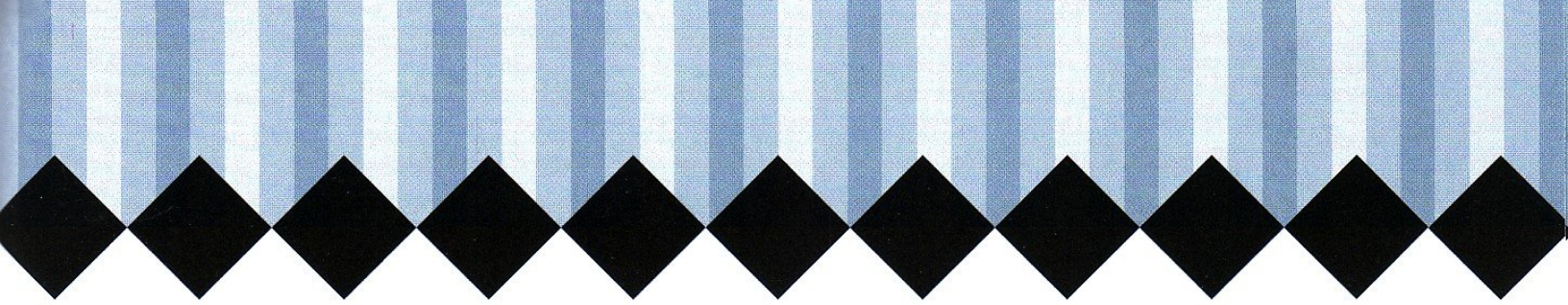


Brenda Lee admires the view from her Hilton Hotel apartment during a trip to London in 1964

Brenda Lee

BORN TO SING

by Cory Albertson



At a special ceremony coinciding with this year's Grammy Awards, Brenda Lee got uncharacteristically choked up—understandable, given that it's not everyday one receives a Lifetime Achievement Award. When Recording Academy President Neil Portnow handed her the trophy, Lee—her 4 foot 9 inch frame dressed in a shimmering black pantsuit—kissed the muted-gold, miniature gramophone in amazement. Then tears came rolling down her face.

In that moment, there's little doubt her classic "I'm Sorry" and the holiday favorite "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" flashed before her eyes ahead of her dozens of other 1960s pop hits (collectively they've sold more than 100 million records). Remembrances of headlining tours across the globe (the Beatles actually opened for her when they started out) probably jockeyed for attention alongside past performances for heads of state like a young Queen Elizabeth II. And her achievement as the only woman to have dual memberships in both the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the Country Music Hall of Fame likely crowded her thoughts even further.

When an artist begins a career, his or her mind is flooded with questions instead of accomplishments. Is this image going to sell me? Will this song get me a record deal? Will playing this venue get me a touring contract? It's often difficult to entertain thoughts of what happens after "making it," much less the possibility of future decades of successful musical contributions. So it must've been gratifying, yes, but also somewhat shocking to be recognized for having achieved such longevity and then to have that longevity meet you full circle in a barrage of thoughts, clips and testimonies. "You don't stop on an everyday basis to think back about what you've done and what you've been able to do in the industry," Lee says from her Nashville home. "When it all hits you slap-dab in the face one night, it's pretty astounding."

Perhaps nothing dominated her mind more, though, than just how far she's come from her childhood growing up in Lithonia, a then-rural, red-clay covered town just east of Atlanta that was a far cry from the success she would achieve. Back then, her thoughts were far more singular, her dreams far more simple. "I didn't know what I wanted [from my career]," she says in her scrappy southern drawl. "It sounds so trite—'all I wanted to do was sing'—but that's all I wanted to do."

Singing for change

From about the time she could talk, little Brenda Mae Tarpley could sing. The unusual smattering of toughness and maturity that boomed out of her tiny frame left everyone listening astounded and wondering if what they just heard was real. "I can only attribute [my voice] to a gift from God," she says simply. "It's just a gift that I've been blessed with that I've tried to take care of and use it to the best of my abilities. People say, 'Oh, I'm going to therapy.' Well, that's been my therapy; my singing has been my therapy. It's meant a lot of things to me on different levels. It's brought me joy and comfort and peace. And it's brought other people in my life a chance to get out of dire situations, me as well."

Because work wasn't always easy to come by for her carpen-

ter father, Lee says her family periodically had to move in with relatives because her parents couldn't afford a place of their own. And often, her parents asked for help just to put food on the table for Lee and her two siblings. "I always say I was poor, [but] I never knew I was poor. I was rich in things that matter—in love, in care and family." Still, it was hard to mask the monetary challenges. "I know that there were people much worse off than we were," she clarifies. "But when you're in that situation you always think, 'Oh, this is bad.' I knew at an early age that it was not good. I don't know how I knew that, but I did. And I knew we had to do something about it. If I was the catalyst for that, then so be it."

From very early on, around age three, the duality of using her voice for entertainment and using it for survival was present. For pure fun, she'd tag along with her father to the local ballpark where he played semi-pro baseball during his time off. Amid the dirt and sparse hometown crowd, she'd sing "Take Me Out To the Ballgame," hopefully adding a bit of luck for her father's team. But at the corner store in Lithonia, she would shrewdly prop herself up on the counter and knock over patrons with her voice as they came in to shop. She'd then hit them up for some necessary change—nickels, dimes and quarters her family desperately needed.

Around age six, she garnered her first paid job—a \$20 performance for a Shriner's Club luncheon—thanks mostly to attention received from regular appearances on local radio and television. And with that performance, her voice shifted from being a novelty to a means to actually change her family's impoverished circumstances.

Singing for millions

Lee's big break came when she turned down a radio station gig in Swainsboro, Ga. in order to muscle her way into meeting Grand Ole Opry staple Red Foley. He'd brought his Missouri-based national television show *Ozark Jubilee* to Georgia for a special broadcast. After an impromptu audition, he agreed to let her perform Hank Williams' honky-tonk standard "Jambalaya." She received three encores. At only 11 years old, Lee was asked to be a regular on the show, cementing her career's destiny and her role as family breadwinner—a lot of pressure on someone so young.

"I think if somebody would've said, 'Boy this is really hard, you've really got a hard job,' maybe I would've thought, 'Oooh, this is hard,'" she explains. "But I loved to sing, so singing to me was a joy. And getting to do what I loved to do was great. Being that young, you don't realize the enormity of the situation that you're in. I just knew I was getting to sing. I had no idea that I was making any kind of money or enough money to sustain my family—thank God that I did. It was never hard for me; it was never a burden for me simply because I absolutely loved what I was doing."

That same year, her stint with Foley led to a contract with Decca Records. But while the label recognized her talent, they weren't so sure what to do with a little girl whose songs needed to compete with emotional powerhouses like labelmate Patsy Cline. First they branded Lee as a rockabilly artist, highlighting her infectious growls with songs like 1957's "Dynamite"—not a runaway hit but important in bestowing her the lifelong moniker "Little Miss Dynamite." It wasn't until she was paired with Cline's



Brenda Lee performing in 1970

producer Owen Bradley that Lee would find her sound. He took her powerful vocal and backed it with slick, pop orchestration sure to cross over to the mainstream. Those recordings, along with Cline's, would help lay the foundation of what would eventually define a musical generation as "The Nashville Sound."

"He was a great mentor, both professionally and personally," Lee notes of Bradley. "I'm sure there would be a Brenda Lee without an Owen Bradley, but [not] to the extent that I've been able to come this far. Without Owen Bradley and his expertise in the studio and as a song man and as a producer that cared about his part of it personally as well as professionally, I don't know that I would be as far along in my career."

Among their first recordings together was 1960's career-defining "I'm Sorry," a straightforward plea of forgiveness from one lover to another. Lee won over the public with her raw, painful delivery, but she still wonders how the emotion manifested within her 15-year-old self. "I don't know [where it came from], because I certainly wasn't dating," she admits. "And I cer-

tainly wasn't experiencing any of those lyrics." In fact, it was her lack of life experience that almost kept the song grounded. "We held 'I'm Sorry' for a couple of years because the suits at the label didn't think I was old enough to record a song that grown up," she says. "But we had a few minutes on the tail-end of a session one day. Owen and I had always loved the song—and we said, 'Let's do it.' It came out and it was Number 1 for three weeks and it's sold over 15 million records."

With the strong wind of "I'm Sorry" at her sails, Lee then stormed concert halls—headlining tours all over the world as America's favorite new teenage phenom. "Some of it is kind of like a blur," she admits. "When I was having so many hit records and going all over the world and all the languages—it was so fast-paced." But it was in front of those live crowds that Lee would find her home. "Just that they knew who I was, just that they knew my songs, just that they even accepted me was overwhelming—it was my dream come true," she says. "I love TV, I love the recording studio, but performing live—to me, that's the deal."

Singing for women

Beyond the legendary songs and hit tours, Brenda Lee's enduring legacy remains her guts—her guts to sing fearlessly in front of anyone who would listen. And perhaps because she was a child with little fear of boundaries, Lee turned out to be a forceful pioneer for future female artists. "I've always been serious about [my career]," she says. "I've always known what I wanted to sing, what I could sing. I've never been bashful about speaking up with adults that had the reigns in the recording studio. Of course, I didn't know anything about business and contracts—that was left up to my mom and my manager. But I knew what I could and what I couldn't do in the studio. And I was never embarrassed to state my opinion."

"I always headlined my shows," she adds. "I tried to carry the banner for women, or young girls, at the time." But that doesn't mean men didn't underestimate her. "I'm sure they did," she says. "They always wanted the girl to co-bill and have the guy headline the bill. But at that point in time, I don't know if it's still that way or not, most record buyers were girls."

The image Lee projected to those girls was also paramount, even though female artists in the 1960s were decidedly more wholesome than today. Still, she kept a tight reign on how she was portrayed. "My whole deal is that I've always kind of been the girl next door and that's an image that I would pick," she acknowledges. "I never was a beauty queen or the girl with a great figure. You know, I'm four foot nine, what can I say? Being the girl next door, to me, was fine. So anybody that tried to paint me in a corner, I wasn't happy with that. I rebelled against that. There have been people that tried to do that, but I am just who I am and I can't be anything else. I don't put on a different hat when I go onstage to be Brenda Lee. That's just who I am."

And she extends that lesson to women who are just starting out—women who might dream of one day being honored with their own Lifetime Achievement award.

"If that's your dream, just go for it," she says, evoking the fearlessness of her youth. "Don't let anybody talk you out of it because once the bug bites you, it's hard not to try it. And just be who you are. Don't prostitute yourself for trends and fads. If you're good enough, all the cream will rise to the top and you'll be fine."



Brenda Lee still reigns on stage.