

THE *The Early Years* CAROL 1933 - 1982 FRANN *by Opal Louis Nations* STORY

The spunky, mischievous and certainly entertaining Carol Fran will be seventy years old come September, and she just wants you to know that age will never slow her down. "I can still sing, shake dance, and play boogie piano as well as I've always done," she says. "The only thing I can't do is kick my legs up as high." In concert she hammers away at the keys to her own brand of Creole humor, starting with standards given the Fran twist, then moving on to what she calls her Zydeco in which she truly gets mean, wild and raunchy.

Carol has slimmed down from 250 pounds to a svelte 160. "I used to tell people that I weighted 125 pounds with 125 pounds of wrapping fat," she says. Carol has also cut back on alcohol. In the old days, it was nothing but easy for her to down a bottle of whiskey or Merlot, the wine of her choice. But since the death of her legendary husband, guitarist Clarence Holliman three Easters ago from cirrhosis of the liver, Carol is fearful of going down that road. Clarence drank heavily during his formative years, and he paid for it later. On top of this, she has to worry about diabetes, although the doctor is not quite sure she has the disease.

Clarence and Carol had been married for over a decade, during which time their love for each other blossomed by the day. She still sheds a tear at the thought of Clarence. Carol currently goes out with guitarist Selwin Cooper, formerly with Buckwheat Zydeco, and accordion / keyboardist Stanley Dural. Sadly, Selwin is no match for Clarence whose credentials included the backing axe for Big Mama Thornton and Bobby "Blue" Bland at Duke Records, but Carol is happy

and Selwin does the best he can.

Outside of entertainment, Carol Fran can cook Cajun as well as the best. She can whip up delicious pork dishes, turkey rolls, and prepare crawfish twenty-one different ways. This all comes natural for a gal born

Carol Anthony at home in Lafayette, La. on October 23, 1933. She fondly remembers her midwife, Mrs. Cora Robinson. Carol's mother, Laura George, was a teacher who quit to stay home after her first was born. Carol has three brothers and three sisters. One brother was killed in the Korean War. Carol's father, Paul Anthony, for whom she has few kind words, traveled a great deal as a chauffeur for a wealthy family in New Orleans. When the job came to an end, he wound up working as a porter on the Southern Pacific Railroad.

Most of Carol's initial talent came from her mother who played piano and danced the Charleston so well the family labeled her "The Charleston Queen." Although Carol idolized her mother, she often resented the disciplinary measures her mother felt she needed to impose to keep her daughter out of trouble. The family was Catholic and ritually attended St. Paul's Catholic Church. The kids were bussed out to St. Francis Xavier Catholic School in Baton Rouge for their education. Carol says her mother often remarked that they were "a mess of Catholics born, and when they die, a mess of Catholics gone."

Carol's friends either went to a movie on Sunday afternoon or hung out at the Burgess Drug

Carol Fran with The Guitar Slim Band, late 1950s



Store around the soda counter. She wanted so much to cut church and join them, but mother made the rules and that was that. All of Carol's sisters had a musical bent. Of the two younger sisters, Alexie played clarinet and flute and Phyllis played piccolo and flute. Her older sister Althea possessed the most impressive vocal chords in the Anthony family. In fact, Althea was a stronger and more talented singer than Carol. Unfortunately, later on, Althea's husband kept her from pursuing her God-given gift.

Carol started taking piano instruction at age five. This was just about the time a favorite Baptist aunt of the family introduced Carol to a livelier, more animated place of worship, that of Rev. Butler's Baptist Church. Carol took to the hymns immediately. In fact she almost at once gave her first concert in public one Sunday singing a medley of "On the battlefield for the Lord" and "Working on the building. The five-year-old's talents were favorably received. Unfortunately, a place could not be found for her in any choir, as the church's choral body was strictly an adult one.

Carol took lessons for five years. The piano tutorials ended abruptly when her mother found out that all she wanted to play was boogie woogie. Carol made a point of going out to see the bands whenever they hit town. It was her pledge that she would go right up and insist on singing with the band, whoever the outfit might be, just as soon as the opportunity came up. She was that determined. When she reached the tender age of fourteen, The Don Conway Orchestra out of Monroe, La. came to town. This was Carol's chance to sing in front of a professional aggregation, and she seized it. After singing one number with the band, she was asked to join, but her mother adamantly insisted that Carol finish school. As it turned out, Carol became one of the youngest high school graduates in Lafayette. She was determined to make music her career.

Around this time she entered a singing contest organized by R&B saxophonist Joe Lutcher. The Lutcher family was from Lake Charles, La. Joe's sister, Nellie, sang colorful blues songs and played piano. Joe's brother, Bubba, led his own band headquartered in Lafayette. Nellie and Bubba became major influences on Carol as did Roy Milton's pianist, Camille Howard, and Ella Mae Morse. Carol won the singing contest and was offered a job with Bubba Lutcher's band. This time Carol had to sneak off without telling her mother. Bubba never paid Carol her prize money. But with the Bubba Lutcher Band she toured up the West Coast all the way to San Francisco. Meanwhile, her mother had contacted the sheriff's department and deputies were waiting for her when she returned. In fairness, her mother was not too hard on her. After all, Carol had graduated high school that past June just like she promised. Following this, Carol worked off and on with Don Conway, Harold Stamborg's band from Beaumont, Texas and Bubba Lutcher once more.

Carol became quite an agile dancer over the years. When she moved to New Orleans she hooked up with Cetlin and Wilson, a song & dance team, and Silas Green from New Orleans (who actually came from Atlanta.) While with Cetlin & Wilson, Carol met Nashville-based producer Jerry Jackson, father of Melvin Jackson who played trumpet in Bobby Blue Bland's band alongside Carol's fourth husband, Clarence Holloman, on guitar. Jerry Jackson took the song & dance trio to Nashville where they worked for him for two seasons.

Working as a chorine for a while, Carol upped stakes once again and headed for the bright lights of Houston where she became Candy Carmichael, a stripper and shake dancer. It was her dream to become a Rockette Dancer in New York, but the Rockettes were not hiring people of color. Billed as "Carol the body beautiful" (she then weighed around 125 pounds), she sang and performed exotic dances at Club Matinee. After three years she returned to New Orleans to work in the French Quarter, sandwiched by a number of engagements in Juarez, Mexico. She reunited with her old childhood sweetheart, saxophonist Bob (Frank) Francois whom she regrets ever making her first husband. Carol has childhood memories of going to the movies with Bob on weekends, driving out to get "" at the corner store and always having to be back before sundown with the family car. But somehow the romance of childhood innocence did not carry over into an adult marital commitment. At least she hung onto part of his name, Fran, an adoption Bob firmly disapproved of. In the French Quarter Carol was billed as "The Sarah Vaughn of the Veaux Carre." During this period she hooked up with the great Billy Wright of whom she tells many stories. Carol toured up and down the West Coast with Billy for eleven months during which time she learned a great deal about staging a show and keeping a band together.

She returned to Lafayette and hooked up with Guitar Slim who was never very punctual or

sometimes never showed up at all. Carol covered for him which she says was a learning experience in and of itself. Carol stayed with Guitar Slim's band for quite some while, filling a residency at The Sugarbowl in Thibodaux which lasted up until Slim's demise. A couple of important incidents occurred in 1957. Carol met Clarence Holloman for the first time at The Dew Drop Inn where he was performing as part of Charles Brown's combo. Cupid's arrows did not fly at that time. It was simply that Carol was fortunate enough to catch and enjoy the Charles Brown unit in action.

The other important event took place after Carol returned from an extensive tour of Mexico. She hooked up with Gabriel Perrodin, a.k.a. Guitar Gable, and His Musical Kings. Besides Gable on guitar, John Johnson sat in on piano, Clinton "Fats" Perrodin on bass with Clarence "Jockey" Etienne seated at the drums. Carol and "Jockey" became firm friends. It was "Jockey" who brought Carol to Crowley and introduced her to Jay D. Miller, then proprietor of the Fais-do-do and Feature labels. Miller also handled the Southlands A&R work for Ernie Young of Excello / Nashboro Records in Nashville. Jay and Ernie did not always see eye to

eye. 1957 was a rough period for the pair. Gable with and without Carol as vocalist cut many daylong sessions for Miller in Crowley. Carol remembers nothing of the countless songs Miller taped that never saw the light of day. "I was loaded on whiskey at the time and can't remember just how many songs we went through. Jay, who is considered less than on the line, was fighting with Ernie over masters and somehow me and Gable's stuff never came out. Ernie refused to return the masters so that we might hawk them elsewhere," she says. Three sessions were treated this way. On February 22, 1958 Carol recorded her first single release, the plaintively hypnotic "Emmett Lee" backed by the perky party sax rocker "One look at you, daddy" supported by Gable's band at Jay Miller's studio. "Emmett Lee" did well in Southern markets and excited enough interest for Jay and Ernie to have her record again three months later. One listen to Carol's "Emmett Lee" assures me that it is not at all related to Chuck Martin's rocking "Emma Lee" on Nasco as Bruce Bastin insists in his liner notes to "Rockin' Fever" (Flyright LP 540, 1978.) However, the flip, "One look at you, daddy," is most surely a re-arrangement of "Daddy, daddy, daddy," the Ruth Brown-adapted song Carol recorded on July 22, 1957.

Her second release, "I quit my knocking" paired with "If we should meet again" failed to make a lot of noise. Meanwhile back in Thibodaux at The Sugarbowl Club, Nappy Brown had replaced Guitar Slim. Carol played piano in Nappy's house

band when she could. Nappy's tenure at The Sugarbowl was short and sweet. "Nappy was kicking up just too much hell," says Carol. "We had to boot him out." Nappy was replaced by Lee Dorsey, and Carol continued on as pianist in the house band. Excello released another two 45s on Carol. She penned or co-authored most of her tunes but was not paid a red cent in royalties. Excello's third release sandwiched the rockin', locked-out Carol on "Knock, knock" twined with a sorrowful-sounding reprise of "Emmett Lee" entitled "Emmett Lee's come back." But little happened.

Carol was given a final chance during late 1959 with the release of (ironically) "One more chance" backed with "Hold me." "One more chance" is a slow, longing blues in the "Emmett Lee" mould. "Hold me" is a calypso-driven love song with a tasty guitar break and lilting vocal harmony background. Excello had tried but failed to launch Carol's recording career. Not that she cared—she was making a good, steady living at The Sugarbowl. In 1961, George Khoury, proprietor of Khoury's Records in Lake Charles, asked Carol to record for him at Eddie Shuler's Goldband studio on Church Street. The mournful "So tired of crying" emerged in late 1961 followed in 1962 by her regionally successful cover of "The great pretender" pitched with Carol's answer record opus "Please stand by me." The 1962 release of "The great pretender" backed by the Cup Cakes (without Cookie) brought Carol an appreciable measure of recognition. In fact, she still includes it in her current performance program.

In late 1962 Carol decided to try California and moved out to Los Angeles where at a tiny studio she worked on a bunch of material for Cliff Goldsmith of Arvee Records in Hollywood. But Carol grew homesick and was back again at The Sugarbowl in Thibodaux before anything could



Carol at the Apollo in 1965



Carol Fran Band, Juarez, Mexico, 1953

be made of the sessions. Carol had returned to a promotion. She was now bandleader of Joe Tex's band. (Joe Tex and Pigmeat Markham had replaced Lee Dorsey.) While working with Joe Tex, Carol put out "After a night" on the tiny Beau Monde label out of Lake Charles. This might have been a one-shot vanity pressing financed by Carol. We do not know for sure, as she insists she has no recollection of ever cutting the single. Carol then befriended ex-deejay Tommy Smalls ("Dr. Jive") who had, some four years prior, been charged with 48 counts of commercial bribery (payola.) Tommy was trying to re-establish himself in the music business and saw Carol, whom he offered to manage, as his meal ticket. The fact is Carol never saw a penny of Tommy's so-called "investment" money.

The best thing to happen was that Tommy took Carol to Jerry Blaine, proprietor of Jubilee Records on West 48th Street in New York. Carol and Jerry hit it off right away, becoming firm and lasting friends. They were so close Jerry sent a turkey to Carol's family at Thanksgiving. In late 1964 Jerry took Carol into the studio to record a cover of the Orioles' 1953 classic, "Crying in the chapel," written by Artie Glenn. In fact, Carol was the sixth significant black artist to record the nugget. The release almost coincided with the Orioles' remake of the song on Lana. Why Jerry chose to cut into the Orioles' sales by having Carol cover the chart on his Josie subsidiary is a mystery. Carol's rendition of "Crying in the chapel" is perhaps one of her most glorious moments, worthy of better notice. But sadly Carol was trumped by Elvis Presley's 1965 RCA warbling which sucked up most of the attention. Despite this, Carol's cover sold well for the company. (It is included on Sequel's 1997 collection, Jubilee Jezebels, Vol. 2, NEM CD 916.) A year later Jerry put Carol with reputable arranger / bandleader Sammy Lowe who had co-proprieted, along with his old pal Tommy Smalls, the tiny Earl label on New York's Eighth Avenue. Carol enjoyed three magnificent Port (a Jubilee affiliate) releases over a period of a year. Standouts included the achingly beautiful "It's my turn now," a blues-colored rendering of the standard "I know, yes I know," the deep soul anthem "Just a letter" and the gorgeously soulful "A world without you." Carol would have continued working with Jerry Blaine had it not been for Jerry's son Steve's intervention at a time when his father was looking at retirement. Steve resented the attention Carol was getting from his father. Good friend, Jubilee A&R man Morty Palitz was in Carol's corner, but even he could not prevent Steve's termination of Carol's contract.



Midway Stadium, St. Paul, MN, 1994

Meanwhile, in Carol's absence from the club scene, Guitar Shorty had replaced Leon Butler in The Sugarbowl Home Band. This put Shorty in the bandleader seat. Guitar Shorty was later replaced by guitar whiz Abe Moore. Most of Carol's Port sides were reissued by Sequel in 1995 on a collection entitled "Jubilee Jezebels," Vol. 1, NEM CD 750. During 1966 Carol spent most of her time touring on package shows. Carol recalls that a man called Jimmy got her with Roulette Records where she cut a cover of Brook Benton's "So close" plus a cover of the Five Keys' old moneymaker, "Out of sight, out of mind." But things did not work out too well at Roulette. The label was looking for a Dinah Washington replacement, and although Carol always professed to be strongly influenced by Dinah's pipes, she did not want to be labeled a Washington clone. Carol says that Roulette recorded six songs on her and that sessions were conducted in Memphis at the Hi Studios under the supervision of Willie Mitchell.

According to information on her website, Carol was embittered by her label experiences and stung by years of ill-informed financial dealings. She returned to Louisiana and spent over a decade confining her activities to small clubs. In 1982 she re-met and married with Clarence Holliman whom she first encountered when playing with Charles Brown back in 1957. Six years later she was back on the road. "We had a trio together," she says. "I took up piano seriously again. Clarence played guitar and we had an automatic drum machine."

Carol embarked on a happy and rewarding fresh second career, but that is the subject of a second article.