

Betty Reid-Soskin and The Story of Reid's Records of Berkeley

by Opal Louis Nations

Betty Reid-Soskin considers herself first an activist, second, an ex-merchant of Berkeley. She was born in 1922 into a Creole family of Catholic heritage. Reid's great-great grandmother, a slave, married her French-born slave owner. Having spent months tracking down documents, Reid can trace her family back to the Seventeenth century. As a child growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area, she remembers attending St. Bernard's Church and to her amazement finding all the white folk sitting in the center aisle seats and the blacks sitting on the sides. The black and white color-bar system thrived even in Northern California.

Segregationist policies were not discussed in the home. Before the church incident, she was quite unaware of them and rarely came up against verbal discrimination. This was before blacks had moved to the Bay Area in significant numbers. Before rules and regulations had to be made. Some of the early black churches of the 1920s and 1930s included Dr. Marion Wiley's Allan Temple on Eighty-fifth in Oakland, Father Wallace on West Street and MacArthur, the Third Baptist in San Francisco, at which Betty's husband's grandfather attended, and Dr. Buell Gallagher's Fellowship Church at Woolsey and King. "Black churches did not really come into their own until after World War II," says Reid-Soskin. "During the post-Depression era, there could not have been more than twelve or perhaps fifteen African-American families living East of Lake Merritt in Oakland," she adds. Big Band jazz and blues were popular among black folk at the time.

The family of Mel Reid (Betty's first husband), dates back to the Civil War. Seven generations of Reids have grown up in Berkeley. Mel Reid was a tall, handsome

athlete who played on the California Eagles basketball team. (Their son, Rick, attended Del Valle High in Walnut Creek where he became a track star.) Mel and Betty were childhood sweethearts who married young. At the start of World War II, Mel's Naval enlistment papers came, and to his astonishment he found that the only profession the Navy would train him for was that of chef. Mel created quite a scene, and after two days he was labeled socially unsuitable for duty in the Navy and discharged.

Betty, meanwhile, having found herself in a situation wherein she would have to fend for herself, volunteered for an administrative post in the Air Force. Reid-Soskin is a light-skinned black who could quite easily pass for white. In fact, the Air Force took her to be white. After a while, Reid-Soskin found out that U.S. Air Force policy did not allow for black folk to fill the type of senior administrative post she was at that point entirely capable of mastering. Air Force brass admitted making a mistake, and when Reid-Soskin asked if she would be allowed to advance up through the ranks, she was told that she would be allowed to work alongside her white colleagues, but should she advance in her job, compensation would be adequately paid. However, rank would ultimately be denied. Because of this, she resigned. Mel and Betty swore never to work for anyone ever again on a full-time basis.

Reid-Soskin was born Catholic and only later switched to Unitarian. Mel, her first husband, was born Unitarian but had always wanted to change to Catholic. By the close of the War, Mel and Betty were given the opportunity of buying the duplex they had at first rented from Aldo Musso, the kindly landlord of the property at 3107/9 Sacramento Street in Berkeley. Musso, who operated a record distribution business, also hired Mel on a part-time basis to take around records to juke box operators. Mel delivered records and changed juke box play lists. Betty was about to deliver the couple's first son and was planning how to map out the family's future.

Through working for Musso, Mel saw the need for an African-American record retail business in West Oakland. The Reids then decided to work toward filling that need. Musso took the first step by offering to help the couple find sources of supply and to establish accounts. Mel then dug out the family basement and filled a truck load of orange crates with 78 RPM records. A cigar box was utilized as a makeshift cash drawer. Reid's Records opened in June 1945, shortly after the birth of their first son. First visitors to the new store were, of course, Mel's old athlete friends. To get the business off the ground, Mel took a day job in the shipyards and worked nights at San Pablo Park playground in the capacity of night supervisor. Betty ran the store and nursed her baby on the premises.

By 1951, the Reid family had grown to a size that required full-time home-care. Betty quit the shop, and Mel's uncle Paul took her place as storekeeper. Paul had previously worked for The Golden State Life Insurance Company. When the store opened, it specialized in African-American blues. Artists like Louis Jordan, Fats Waller, and Billie Holiday kept the business in the black. When Wynonie Harris recorded "Round the clock blues" for Philo Records, the store was swamped with orders. Patrons lined up around the block before the doors opened.

In 1952, the family moved to Walnut Creek. The store began selling gospel music and kept the top selling titles of the day in stock. Sides by Prof. Earl Hines, The Angelic Gospel Singers, and The Trumpeteers were the hottest items. Reid-Soskin asserts that her interest in gospel music is a cultural one, not an interest that is purely spiritual. Growing up in the only black family on the block, Reid-Soskin sought to find her roots. She looked upon gospel music as a piece of her identification, as something

out of her culture. Having arrived at this, she began writing songs in the gospel idiom with lyrics that reflected the plight of black people.

The store did very well and sustained the family. In 1947, Mel bought time on KRE radio on Ashby Street in Berkeley. This allowed him to host one of the first Bay Area gospel programs. The thirty-minute "Religious Gems" program used to make special notice of dedications, but dedications got so many they had to drop them altogether after awhile. Mel worked extremely hard at building the business, almost seven days a week from seven in the morning until midnight. In no time at all the Reids had two stores, one in Berkeley, one in Oakland. Mel bought property and soon owned almost every house on the block between Prince and Woolsey Streets. But prosperity was not slated to last.

Paul took Mel's radio spot in 1951 and added "Spirituals at 6" in 1957. When KRE went down, Paul Reid switched to KDIA with James Burton. Work was done to move the record store up to the ground floor in 1954 and remodeling was carried out to accommodate stock. Paul built up a large and loyal listenership on KRE and soon was able to branch out into the concert side of the music business. From 1954 through 1958, Mel and Paul Reid organized annual gospel extravaganzas at The Oakland Auditorium. The programs included choir competitions, at which the winners were awarded lavish-looking cups. They brought out Aretha and her father, Rev. Charles Franklin, The Davis Sisters, Soul Stirrers, Highway Q C's, Rasberry Singers, Staple Singers, and many others. Their concerts were major yearly sell-out events. Local acts usually opened the programs. Paul also set up his own Reid's Record label and recorded local Bay Area gospel talent such as The Lathanettes.

Legend has it that Aretha Franklin cut her first sides for Reid's. Paul, who had built up an enormous professional reputation in the Bay Area, married an alcoholic, succumbed to tuberculosis, and died in the late 1960s. Things took a downward turn when Mel became a diabetic. Years of long, hard work days had resulted in failing health. His problems were stress-related. To add to Mel's work load, he took on the management of The Edwin Hawkins Singers and traveled with them on their first European tour. "He didn't realize what he was getting into," says Reid-Soskin. "He was way over his head in a lot of ways, stretched too far." He got into gambling, foolishly thinking that he could win enough to keep things together. One by one, Mel and Betty lost the properties they had acquired, including the ownership of their own home.

In 1971, the couple was divorced. A year later, Reid-Soskin moved back to Berkeley and found a job working for the University of California. It was there that she met Prof. William Soskin, a research psychologist. They were soon married. Things got worse at the store. In an effort to remove old railroad tracks, Sacramento Street and the sidewalk were torn up and roped off to traffic for sixteen months. Shoppers fortunate enough to find parking close by had to leap over saw-horses to reach the store. Business dropped, and the neighborhood deteriorated. Crack houses had sprung up everywhere. The store sank so low that it got to be a place where local addicts came for paraphernalia.

By 1978, the business was in foreclosure, and Reid-Soskin was forced to have Mel placed in a hospital. It looked like Reid's Records would close its doors for good. At least at this point, it seemed the worst would happen. But as Reid-Soskin packed and moved inventory, she was confronted by people who kept coming down to see what was going on. It was then she realized that Reid's Records had, over the years, become a community institution. The store motto had been "If God is your partner, make your plans large." She could not let it all go. With a flurry of phone calls, she

pleaded with her creditors to hold off for awhile. She needed a chance to build the business back up again.

Slowly but surely, Reid-Soskin built the business back up. Neighborhood crack houses were torn down, and soon through her commerce she was able to create a social agenda for change. Quitting her job at the University, Reid-Soskin, with the aid of her sons, transformed the store into primarily a place where black religious merchandise could be acquired. "Eighty percent of our business is in gospel, the other twenty constitute our stock of jazz and R & B," says Reid-Soskin. "We carry lots of pulpit and choir robes, bibles, and books of other black religions." The store also carries a wide variety of gospel song books and videos. "Black videos of all kinds have been my specialty. People come from places forty or fifty miles away to rent them," says Reid-Soskin. She put out a newsletter that went to nine thousand people around the world. Orders poured in.

Mel died in 1987, and shortly thereafter Reid-Soskin gave over the day-to-day management of the store to her son David who has transformed the business into one that fully fills the needs of the contemporary gospel patron. Betty Reid-Soskin is currently very much in touch with the needs of the less fortunate, the poor, and the homeless of the East Bay. As a legislative aid to a council person, she gets to serve on committees and meetings with the mayor and her staff.

-- Opal Louis Nations December, 1998