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Donna De Lory > Madonna's Mac-Backed Back-Up Singer's
Spiritual Reawakening Captured On Protocols

Words by Joshua Rotter March 2005

Perhaps the most famous backing vocalist in history, Donna De Lory is best known as Madonna's supporting vocalist and dancer on a host of hit shows from "Who's That Girl" to last summer's "Reinvention Tour." Who can forget De Lory's heyday as a virtual fixture in Madonna's troupe of singers and dancers, featured heavily on the singer's albums, the "Vogue" video, awards show performances and most prominently in the "Blond Ambition Tour" documentary "Truth or Dare" (1991), flirting with Madonna's brother, asking Madonna who the love of her life was, and bravely strutting hand-in-hand with Madonna and co-backer, Niki Harris towards the stage at a Toronto show, singing an a cappella rendition of "Holiday," past police men prepared to arrest Madonna for public indecency for a masturbatory moment in her steamy stage rendition of "Like A Virgin."

Mere luck alone cannot account for De Lory's continued presence in the career of a pop icon, known for constant reinvention, which often requires new collaborative talent. Although Harris no longer supports Madonna on the road, De Lory continues to back the singer in a lesser, more traditional capacity.

But De Lory has learned through a decade of spiritual practice that one must accentuate the positive in every situation. "It was a great experience," De Lory said about the recent tour. "A lot more hits, so we had a hardcore fan base. Madonna was very happy doing the show, because she is at a good place in her life. She's tuning in and appreciating audiences more than ever. She wants to put on a great show, and this really was another great show. I had a good time."

Motherhood and her own thriving solo career also aid in De Lory's appreciation for her revised role in Madonna's show. "In the beginning I said I wanted the challenge of dancing a lot," she said. "So in other shows, I did more. But this time, there were more dancers who were amazing, so I did more on

singing. But those are personal decisions. At the time I was so thankful that it happened, but no Niki makes it different. She was off doing her own thing, but I missed her. We had always done the shows together, so it's a different energy without her. Talk about removing the ego. But I had to be there to support Madonna in every way she wanted. But I don't care, because it was great to be there. I had my one-year-old baby with me on the road and I had more time off to promote my record. So it made it easier."

And De Lory, the 40 year old Woodland Mills, California native, now has her own career to celebrate. Her current release and fourth solo album, "The Lover & The Beloved," a Sanskrit and English CD that sets ancient Indian mantras to modern beats and explores the transcendent and meditative power of music. recorded on a Mac G4 using ProTools, it tracks her musical and spiritual evolution, bringing together her world music influences, a collaboration with cellist, Cameron Stone, yoga fans and a growing interest in Sanskrit chants.

Learning her first chant "Gananpati Om" at musician David Stringer's house six years ago, De Lory instantly felt the power and the peace of the sung mantra.

"I would see the written chants hanging on his walls and think that it's so simple," she said. "We would sing together before I knew what it meant. It was just the power of singing together and giving yourself up to another person. I turned off a certain part of myself and really came from my heart, because you're not caught on the English language. It's all about your intention or feeling that you want to express. When I'm singing, I'm praying to remove my ego, and I get lost in it, and the ego isn't there. It was a door opening into a new world for me and it completely aligned itself with my life and the life I want to lead."

Although the lyrics on De Lory's new release may seem enigmatic, its sentiment – embracing the power of love – is universal. "The songs are mantras when you sing them over and over," she said. "I didn't want to sing about things that were not positive, especially if I had to sing them over and over again."

To maintain the level of freedom she feels when she chants, De Lory has become increasingly dependent on Mac technology, which she has used since 2000 for recording. "I made 'Lover

and The Beloved' on ProTools, because I wanted to do more editing," she said. "It made me more free, because I can do music and can worry about the arrangements later. I'd rather have the people do their thing and be more free, and then play what I hear and chop it up later. I used to resist technology, but I have to embrace it now, because it saves time. It's incredible. I really fought with it, because I didn't want to sit there editing. I wanted to be an artist. But I have an editor working on it and I just tell him what to do, because then I can close eyes and feel it. I always say 'Make the bumpers touch' meaning bring the loops closer together."

De Lory, who comes from a musical family, has been singing backing vocals since she was eight on Disney records and a number of commercials and movie soundtracks.

"I was fortunate, because my dad was a record producer and a musician, so I was in the studio and backstage at concerts a lot growing up," she said. "It brought me joy and excitement to be around artists. Since my dad always hired singers on records, I started singing myself, and through my dad's friends who wanted children singers, I began going to auditions. At that point, I could sing well and had the talent, so the work came."

But De Lory admitted that as soon as she started working with major recording artists as a teenager, she knew she wanted to graduate from backing to front and center. "From the time I worked with Kim Carnes at age 14, I was studying artists," she said. "I listened to her growing up, and it gave me the opportunity to be around her. That's what I wanted to do, and singing background allowed me to be around artists in the studio, which I loved. I also worked with Barry Manilow, who was always teaching us and giving advice."

After a brief move to Nashville a year later, following the death of her mother from breast cancer, De Lory returned to Southern California to pursue a career in music. While she tried her hand at more than one band, De Lory's greatest break came when Madonna's then keyboardist and co-producer, Patrick Leonard, heard her "Open Your Heart" demo tape.

"He said 'I love your voice' and asked me to sing for him," she said. "He knew I needed work, so he'd have me sing with singers like Fee Waybill, Ray Parker Jr., Carly Simon, Carole King and Belinda Carlyle." Aware that Leonard worked with

Madonna, De Lory approached Leonard about securing a spot on Madonna's "Who's That Girl Tour" in 1987.

"I knew he worked with Madonna, whose stuff I liked a lot, so I was always asking him to come on and get me in there," she said. "I had to be respectful, but I kept bugging him. I would call him up and he would say it's not going to happen, because Madonna wants the African American girls from 'Little Shop of Horrors' who had a totally different vibe than me."

But things changed in De Lory's favor when she received a call from Leonard, who informed her that one of the singers wasn't working out. The producer asked De Lory to come in for an audition with 100 other people.

"At auditions, they put us into groups of three to sing," she said. "And the group I was in was loud and flat, but I knew I could get it, if I could just sing by myself. But when Madonna said that everyone was bad, and to stop, I thought the girls ruined my chance. But Leonard said that the two of us should sing together. At one point, while we were singing, she had her back to me, and turned around, and asked, 'Why aren't you singing?' And Pat said, 'She was. You just blend together perfectly.' And there was the realization that we sang perfectly."

De Lory was instantly hired for the tour, and used this and future tours to learn from Madonna, in the same way she learned from artists in the past, with the hope of eventually launching her own solo career when the time was right. "I had always wanted to be an artist, and had been in bands," she said. "But I wanted the right situation to push me forward in my career. After Madonna, I thought, 'I can do this, I can be a solo artist, and I can be the boss.' And after the 'Blond Ambition' tour, there was a lot of excitement. So I started writing songs, became more confident about my writing and started working towards a solo deal."

De Lory soon signed a record deal with MCA in 1992 and released "Donna De Lory" (1992), which led to comparisons with Kate Bush and Tori Amos, and contained the top ten dance hit "Just A Dream," on which she teamed with Madonna. "I released the first record and they said, 'You're going to be the next Madonna,'" she said. "But I wrote a pop record, which went to radio, and didn't catch on, so it was dropped after the first single, which devastated me, because I put so much into it."

In 1993, De Lory was back on the road with Madonna on "The Girlie Show Tour." "I went back on tour with her again, because every time I worked with her, I was always promoting my own record," she said. "At that time, it was still pop dance music. But I had been around the world, and was discovering world music influences like Indian percussive instruments and the Harmonium, and loved it. So I wanted to include that in my music. But it was not pop enough for the label, so I ended up leaving."

Without a major label contract, De Lory decided to find herself, turning her living room into a studio and recording music with a mic, an ADAT multi-track recorder and musician Cameron Stone on cello. "It was so difficult, and it took a while to write different songs and make different sounds," she said. "But I had a great time, because I was not trying to please anyone and have a hit. I was trying to find my own voice. It was the start of my world music career. I began working it into my pop songs, mostly using it for the bridge, because I didn't think I could make music in Sanskrit. But when I got into the poetry from spiritual texts, that really resonated with me. I was completely humbled by the culture and knew this was something I wanted to get into. I ended up making a CD that was beautiful and loved it."

The duo's first album, "Love Never Dies" with lyrics that read like romantic poems and heartfelt confessionals, was released on their own label, Dirty Bird, and initially sold only at their concerts. The album was later re-issued as "Bliss" (2000) and credited solely to De Lory.

It was Scott Welsh, Alanis Morissette's manager, who convinced De Lory to go "solo." "He knew I wanted this project to be a group," she said. "But he always said, 'you're the artist, because it's your own voice and music, so you've got to use your name. It is what it is and it's Donna De Lory.' So I repackaged it and made it in my name."

Following Madonna's "Drowned World Tour," which De Lory took part in, the singer delved into her spiritual practices more deeply. "I had always been so interested in Hinduism and Sanskrit, so as I delved deeper into it, it all started clicking and making sense. So I said, 'This time, my life will become more about this.' I really embraced it. But I still feel like more of a student touching on different cultures and

truths on a lifetime of study."

De Lory next released "In The Glow" (2003), a devotional record in English, which combines pop and inspirational, chant and prayer – her first ProTools-made album. "It was healing, spiritual and moved people," she said. "I didn't expect it to touch so many people. Music and my life went in that direction. Music became even more important to me, because I realized I can make people feel another way. It's great to make people dance, but even better to make them appreciate love and think about their loved one."

Mirroring Madonna's spiritual development through the study of Kabbalah, De Lory has clearly revamped her list of priorities. She said she is no longer the young, naive, fame-driven woman audiences remember from "Truth Or Dare."

"I knew on our last tour, that the things that are important to Madonna now are family and health, and really appreciating the simple things in life, although she has everything and her life is not simple," she said. "We're all getting older and we've all faced death, and had friends that died. We've lived long enough to know what's important in life. She has a spiritual yearning. There is a mightiness that's there, and it's beautiful to have that around me."

"I used to want to travel so much and I didn't want to come home," she said. "I wanted to be a singer and travel the world forever. I wanted to leave my family behind. The most important thing then was being a star and being in the light. I wanted to be around Madonna, because of the attention and love I got. But it's not important to me now. But I wouldn't be who I am now, being a mother, having a family, and being more rooted, had I not experienced all that."

Still, De Lory admits that there are still material benefits to doing Madonna tours, since it enables the singer to stock up on the latest Mac products, like the new Powerbook G4 she purchased during the tour. Soon she will upgrade the G4 Mac she uses for recording. "I'm going to upgrade to a better system," she said. "Madonna's tours enable me to afford to upgrade and get better computer systems."

For more information on Donna De Lory log on to www.donnadelory.com

