

# Donna De Lory ~ Biography

It's a particularly steamy July afternoon, but singer, songwriter and producer Donna De Lory is ensconced in the cool of Jivamukti Yoga Center's café, taking a quick herbal tea break before soundchecking that evening's concert at the popular New York studio. Exuberant, cheerful and very pregnant on this summer day (her second daughter finally arrived in November), De Lory says her return to Manhattan feels especially meaningful. Not only will she be jamming live on many of the new songs that appear on her sultry, invigorating new album *Sanctuary*, like the luminous title track, but while mixing the album in a Chelsea studio just months earlier, De Lory realized that she had truly – and blissfully – found the peace, fulfillment and inspiration she has been seeking as an artist and musician. With *Sanctuary*, De Lory has crafted an expressive, spiritually-charged album that embraces both her passionate exploration of yoga and meditation inspired music, like 2004's mantra-driven *The Lover and The Beloved*, and the expansive, mystical folktronica that was the foundation of 2006's *Sky Is Open*.

“*Sanctuary* bridges two worlds for me,” says De Lory, “between the outside physical world and the inner space we hold within of the spirit.”

She takes a sip of tea, searching for a simple way to explain a genre-defying album that is deeply personal, yet carries an uplifting, universal message, easily accessible to even casual listeners. “It's about being on a spiritual journey. Being introspective but still being part of the world. This comes with challenges: like finding peace within ourselves and forgiving those who hurt us. It is also about learning to love ourselves and accept who we are beneath all that we identify ourselves with, which is divine love.

Donna De Lory's many fans know that she's long bridged vastly disparate worlds in music. The petite, vivacious brunette with the mighty voice may have brashly stepped into the mainstream as Madonna's sassy tour sidekick for years, but as a solo artist, Donna follows an alternate muse. A devoted student of yoga and spiritual teachings, she is inspired not only by Western pop, but by Indian devotional music, Sanskrit mantras, Northern African grooves, psychedelic arrangements, and dance beats. The Topanga Canyon-based singer enjoys making what she calls “meditative music” that can smartly – and sensuously – lend itself to dance-friendly, earthy remixes; richly textured music that can heal through either contemplation or celebration. Buoyed by her sweetly potent vocals, De Lory's *Sky is Open* was awash in what she calls “spiritual love songs.” Now with *Sanctuary*, she's taken her distinctive, mellifluous sound a step further, marrying beautiful songs, mantras, and sonic collages to world-influenced melodies inspired by the transcendent, metaphysical sounds of artists like Peter Gabriel, Kate Bush and George Harrison. In fact, the late Beatles guitarist was very much on her mind when she adapted her own verses to Durga Das (David Newman)'s song “Guru Om” for the album.

“The teachings of Swami Satchidananda touch me so deeply,” explains De Lory, who befriended the yoga master's assistant following the release of *The Lover and the Beloved*. “I find great truth in his words and the life he led. And as a child, my first taste

of Eastern philosophy was through Harrison's 'My Sweet Lord.' I was a kid, chanting 'Hare Krishna' and the name of God, and I didn't even know what it meant. But Harrison made it into a huge pop song. It's all about your intention. You could chant all of the names of the friends who you love and you're still talking about God."

Newman, who has collaborated with Donna on "Hey Ma Durga" from *The Lover and Beloved*, first played "Guru Om" for De Lory nearly two years ago. Enamored of the mantra ("I could hear myself singing it," she says), Donna rewrote the verses. Yet the repetition of the Sanskrit word "Satchidananda" remained. Donna was inspired by American academic and mythologist Joseph Campbell who defined the word as "diving off into bliss" and given her immersion in the teachings of Integral Yoga founder Sri Swami Satchidananda, who lived by the idea that "truth is one, paths are many," the chant resonated. And those many paths musically unite with "Guru Om," a vibrant anthem of rumination and rejuvenation. Producer De Lory and longtime collaborator, cellist Cameron Stone, deliberately chose Beatles-esque flourishes to give the track an orchestral Pepperland-meets-Woodstock feel, infusing the track with poignantly crafted strings arrangements.

As with the selection, production and execution of the exquisite "Guru Om," De Lory's process of choosing the seven tracks on *Sanctuary* was an intimate, careful journey. She collaborated with her trusted family of musician *compadres* - Stone, drummer and percussionist Dave Allen, guitarist Jerry Leonard and bassists Mark Browne and Mark Gorman. Plus Donna recruited special guests like guitarists James Harrah (Madonna, Aretha Franklin) and Brazil's Heitor Piera on "Lokah Samastah Sukhino Bhavantu" as well as Kirtan master Dave Stringer on "Bathe In These Waters." As she had done with *Sky is Open*, she sought out acclaimed producer/engineer Kevin Killen (Peter Gabriel, Kate Bush, Elvis Costello) to mix the album, a process Killen said he enjoyed immensely, given the vivacity of the collaboration and the "integrity" and "very emotional" quality of Donna's music and vocal performance on this project, pointing to tracks like "Lokah Samastah," "Jai Mai" and "Aham Prem" as prime examples of her delicate, yet dynamic, artistry.

"I wanted to leave as small a fingerprint on the record [as possible]," Killen explains, "but having said that I wanted to expand the three dimensional soundscape and help transport the listener to a more peaceful place. I always try to let the intent of the artist guide me and in this case Donna had accomplished 95% of her vision, so that it was very easy for me to complete the project."

De Lory, who worked with Killen in his Manhattan studio, found unexpected inspiration in the cacophonous backbeat of New York, despite the pastoral birth of the album itself at her Topanga Canyon studio overlooking the Santa Monica Mountains.

"As I worked on the tracks, I looked out high above the trees on to hawks flying and beautiful sunsets," says De Lory. "I would take my rough mixes and go hiking through native oak trees to get perspective on the music. It was such a different experience to be in New York mixing [the album] with Kevin. It gave me an energy and perspective that

someone in the city would have listening to the music. People living in the energy of the big city life with all of its distractions and overstimulation need this kind of music in such a deep way.”

That bold mix – urban pulse-meets-verdant ramble – is beautifully rendered in the sacred, yet sensually-charged “Jai Ma,” a track that De Lory envisioned as the perfect alchemy of East and West “in a funky, earthy way.”

“I wanted to sing many names of the goddess, of Mother,” says De Lory, who knows well the tremendous highs (and occasional exhausted lows) of motherhood, completing her work on *Sanctuary* while expecting her youngest daughter. In fact, Sharon Gannon, the cofounder of the Jivamukti Yoga Center in New York and the esteemed co-creator of the Jivamukti style of vinyasa, praises De Lory saying, “Donna is the perfect combination of earth mama and fairy child. She’s grounding, sublime and soulful ... [with a] voice that oscillates between passionate laments reminiscent of Janis Joplin and the crystal clarity of Enya.”

For “Jai Ma,” De Lory reached out to a guest artist - Mala Gunguly, a classic North Indian virtuosic vocalist now based in Los Angeles. Donna first heard her sing on one of Jai Uttal’s albums. De Lory smiles when describing the recording session.

“When Mala came in to sing on the track I thought a long time about all of the other Sanskrit names of the goddess she could sing,” says De Lory. “I didn’t want to leave anyone out. But with a very wise look in her eyes, Mala said to me, ‘it’s all Mother, it’s all Ma.’ So when we recorded, she mostly sang ‘Jai Ma!’ and a melody from one of her own compositions, a song about a child calling to its mother, asking for mercy. Later that night, I took the instruments out of the mix and just left her voice and the piano. It moved me to tears.”

Healing – and its many dimensions - became an important subtext in the creation of *Sanctuary*. De Lory’s embrace of another David Newman song – the devotional “Bathe In These Waters” was deeply personal; the song became the backbone of her own healing process following the 2006 death of her older sister after a long battle with ovarian cancer. De Lory’s fervent belief that music can serve as a vessel of compassion, comfort and passage has also been the mantra of the singer’s own fans, much to her astonishment. She confessed to being profoundly affected when a young mother, recently diagnosed with cancer, attended one of her concerts, finding an oasis of rehabilitation and strength in Donna’s music.

“I can’t even tell you how deep this all was,” says De Lory, a bit sadly, “this woman, her journey, her strength and her courage. She turned to my music to help heal her, but she was helping *me* find myself – why I’m here. I just want to stay in touch with her, do a healing circle for her ... but on a meaningful level, that’s what I want to do with my music too. This record is consciously in that direction.”

Music has always been a catalyst in De Lory's life. "It's my yoga," she says. "It connects me to the divine." She was raised in a musical home in Calabasas, CA. Her grandfather played cello and upright bass for the Warner Brothers Studio Orchestra, working on some of Hollywood's most classic films, like "Casablanca" and "Gone With The Wind." Her mother was a singer and dancer and her father, the legendary musician and producer Al De Lory, played keyboards with Phil Spector's Wrecking Crew. He contributed keyboards to the Beach Boys landmark album *Pet Sounds* and produced Glen Campbell's classic hits of the 60s and 70s, like "Wichita Lineman" and "By The Time I Get to Phoenix." He's been inducted into the Country Hall of Fame.

Donna made her professional debut at age eight singing a Recipe dog food commercial. Barely a teenager, she contributed vocals to projects by Kim Carnes, Barry Manilow, Santana and even the *Rocky II* soundtrack. She even crooned the theme song for Disneyland's "It's A Small World" ride.

When Donna was sixteen, she moved to Nashville, where her father found a professional home in that city's recording industry mecca of Music Row. As a Los Angeles teenager encountering the Southern temperament of Nashville, she was initially perplexed but quickly found a community of like-minded free spirits.

"I hung out on Music Row singing demos and made friends with a lot of songwriters," Donna recalls. "I worked in a vegetarian restaurant, became vegetarian, the first step on the path toward the life I'm living now. Being around songwriters and seeing the attention they paid to their craft inspired me. I decided I wanted to be an artist and a songwriter. I picked up a guitar and realized I had a talent for it."

Following high school and with aspirations of becoming a performer, Donna returned to LA to study dancing, singing and acting ... and found the transition back to California as an adult just as challenging.

"I began studying yoga at this studio on Robertson Boulevard," says De Lory. "I don't even know how I ended up there. Part the reason, I think, was because I had a crush on my teacher. I was alone in the city and the community that I found was at that yoga studio, macrobiotic center and a local Sikh restaurant. It kept me grounded and gave me a sense of home when I was running around to auditions, trying to get a break in Hollywood."

A demo tape of her singing Madonna's hit single "Open Your Heart" from 1986's *True Blue* reached Pat Leonard, Madonna's producer. Duly impressed, Leonard recruited De Lory as a backing vocalist for his productions for artists like the Tubes' Fee Waybill, Ray Parker, Jr. and Carly Simon. Leonard helped her land a gig as one of Madonna's singing/dancing stage companions. Along with cohort Niki Haris, the charismatic De Lory became an integral part of Madonna's on-stage performing troupe for years, working with Madonna on six international tours including the *Who's That Girl*, *Blonde Ambition*, *Drowned World* and *Confessions*. Donna also had a part in Alek Keshishian's infamous – and fascinating – Madonna documentary *Truth or Dare*.

De Lory still regards Madonna as the brave older sister who taught her how to be strong in the male-dominated music industry. “She always challenged me to reach within myself, De Lory explains, “to find my own truth and express that. Though it was difficult to not get too caught up in that fast-paced world, I always managed to stay on my own path and listen to my heart.”

In turn, Madonna says that she has “always admired” De Lory’s voice, citing her songwriting as “poignant and heartfelt.”

Though enjoying her world travels and work with Madonna, De Lory strived to keep herself grounded amid her more glamorous surroundings, weighing down her suitcases with spiritual texts. Eager to explore her own music and identity, she released her self-titled debut on MCA in 1993. Most of the songs on the album were self-penned; critics praised the sincerity of her vocals and the record’s winning blend of club-friendly dance tunes and heartfelt ballads. She scored a #1 single in Japan with “Praying For Love” and a top10 dance hit in the U.S. with “Just a Dream.” Donna’s perception of music was deeply influenced by the sounds she discovered while exploring the streets of Brazil, Japan, Israel, Turkey, Argentina and dozens of other countries. “Those rhythms and melodies opened my ears and my heart,” she recalls, “I was studying belly dancing and listened to world music all of the time. The instrumentation was familiar to me, though I didn’t always know what it all was; I just knew I had to incorporate those hypnotic and ancient sounds into my own music.”

De Lory was determined to mine a deeper, richer, far more resonant and spiritual vein in her music. Her meeting with her friend and now longtime collaborator Stone, was fortuitous. The two musicians spoke a similar language in the studio and De Lory felt the freedom to write and play music that not only celebrated her pop experience, but her fascination with world music. The result was the album *Bliss*, an exotic, lush hybrid of sounds.

“My label at the time was hoping I’d be the next Paula Abdul,” laughs De Lory. “It didn’t work out that way. They didn’t know what to make of my interest in world music on *Bliss*. It was a time when indie artists were really empowered by new technology that made home recording so accessible. It certainly marked a turning point for me in the making of my own music.”

De Lory released *Bliss* in 2000 on her own label and the album, recorded in a studio Donna and Cameron built with their own hands, was an instant success. While Donna toured traditional venues like House of Blues, she found that the spiritual vibe of *Bliss* didn’t make much sense over the clatter of Heineken bottles or a noisy crowd. Thanks to a funny encounter with her future friend, musician and yoga center owner David Newman – in the produce aisle of a Philadelphia supermarket – De Lory was inspired to begin performing in healing centers and yoga studios and eventually in churches and other spiritual enclaves.

“When you play in a space like that, people are so into the music,” Donna says. “They want to be taken away; they’re closing their eyes, letting go and really listening.”

Despite the spiritual bent of *Bliss*, there was significant mainstream attention too. Superstar club DJ/producer Junior Vasquez remixed “On & On” and the track hit the Top 20 on Billboard's Club Dance chart. Music from the album was widely licensed for film and TV, including the daytime drama *Passions* and the Lifetime Network series *Beyond Chance*. Emboldened by the success of *Bliss* and 2003's *In the Glow* – music created on her own terms - De Lory's next two albums, the mantra-driven *The Lover and The Beloved* and the more mainstream *Sky Is Open* again wove together elements of world beat and more meditative rhythms.

But with *Sanctuary*, De Lory has created an album that is the joyful confluence of her many creative roads. She's unabashed about speaking honestly about her early dreams of pop stardom countered by her discovery of a more spiritual self, buoyed by her infatuation with the vibrant music she encountered during her travels.

Her early childhood experiences have more resonance now; she vividly recalls asking to attend church even though her family wasn't religious (“my mother was a recovering Catholic,” says De Lory, smiling). She remembers, as a teenager, visiting an ashram in Santa Monica and the swirl of people, chanting, the smell of chai and the strains of the harmonium. It made an indelible mark on her. Now, with her ever-evolving spiritual music and studies, De Lory has found her own haven. It is reflected intimately in her writing on *Sanctuary*, via songs like the title track and her deeply moving adaptation of “Locah Samastah,” with which she ended her set on this humid July night at Jivamukti Yoga Center. The joy and tenderness exhibited between performer and audience was palpable, ecstatic and moving; and De Lory grinned as the crowd sweetly sang along with her.

"Playing music is my Yoga, it is my bliss," she said later that night, a very tired, very pregnant, but very happy woman. "Being able to sing and create is the gift that I have to give and I realize this more and more everyday. When I play, I get lost in the music, my mind stops, I am in the moment and I am free. This is a place I never want to leave."