

REMEMBERING

DELLA REESE | 1931-2017

Renowned singer, 'Touched by an Angel' star

BY MAUREEN O'DONNELL
Staff Reporter

Before she was on the hit TV show "Touched by an Angel," Della Reese touched Chicago audiences, first as a gospel singer groomed by Mahalia Jackson, and later, as a charismatic chanteuse who packed the Regal Theater, London House and Mister Kelly's, where she even recorded an LP.

She bit off lyrics with a steely voice that shifted easily from a commanding growl to a moan.

"She really had stage presence, some magic about her," said Chicago jazz composer and pianist Ramsey Lewis, who hit the big time with the 1965 hit "The In Crowd." "When she was in town, the whole town was buzzing."

"Not only a wonderful voice, but one-of-a-kind. She was like Dinah Washington or Ella Fitzgerald," Lewis said. "When they sing their first two or three notes, you knew — that's Ella, that's Dinah, that's Della."

Ms. Reese, who did public awareness campaigns about diabetes after being diagnosed with the disease, died Sunday at her California home, according to her "Touched by an Angel" co-star Roma Downey. She was 86.

"I know heaven has a brand new angel this day," Downey said.

Ms. Reese metamorphosed from a self-described boy-crazy young gospel singer, to a wasp-waisted, sequin-gowned chanteuse, to a witty talk-show raconteur, to an Emmy-nominated actor whose timing and conviction could anchor a scene — or a whole TV show.

Later in life, she was ordained a minister by the Chicago founder of an early mega-church, the Rev. Johnnie Coleman of Christ Universal Temple. Then, she opened her own church in Los Angeles.

In 1958, Ms. Reese sang "Lonelyville" in the C-movie "Let's Rock."

In 1969, she became the first African-American woman to host a talk show, "Della."

"It was 15 years later before Oprah Winfrey got the chance," she said in a 2012 interview with the St.



Della Reese often sang at Mister Kelly's nightclub in Chicago.

Below: Della on a fur-clad stroll.

SUN-TIMES ARCHIVE PHOTOS

Louis Post-Dispatch.

Growing up in Detroit, her name was Deloreese Early.

"My mother says that when I was born and they slapped me, I didn't cough," she told the Television Academy Foundation. "She said I began to sing and I never stopped."

Eventually, she was booked for weeks straight at Detroit's Flame Show Bar. Ms. Reese performed with Sarah Vaughan, Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Peggy Lee and Nat King Cole, on whom she had a crush. She used to hide in the stage curtains to watch him perform.

Once, Cole admonished his band



not to tease her about it because she was learning showmanship. "I just floated around for about a month ... because he had defended me," she told the foundation.

In the 1940s, she learned phrasing and emotional impact as a back-up singer for Mahalia Jackson. But Chicago's Queen of Gospel was an eagle-eyed road guardian for a lively teenager. "The way I saw it, I saw the boys chasing me, and I saw me letting them catch me, and I saw it being wonderful," Ms. Reese once told a laughing audience. "And Mahalia just stood in my way."

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RAMSEY LEWIS, Chicago jazz composer and pianist who hit the big time with the 1965 hit "The In Crowd"

Sam Cooke. She had the good looks, personality and gospel conviction," said Bob Marovich, author of "A City Called Heaven, Chicago and the Birth of Gospel Music" and editor of *journalofgospelmusic.com*. "She had that jazz singer's ability to really use the words, almost like a musician would use a note."

In 1958, she recorded "A Date with Della Reese at Mr. Kelly's in Chicago." In liner notes, Sun-Times columnist Irv Kupcinet praised her "deliberate and deft" delivery.

Her greatest success came on television. She guest-starred on the "Mod Squad" in 1968; as a regular on Freddie Prinze's "Chico and the Man"; with comic Redd Foxx on "The Royal Family"; with Gladys Knight and Flip Wilson on "Charlie & Co.," and as the angel Tess in "Touched by an Angel," which ran from 1994 till 2003.

In movies, Ms. Reese had a role in 2005's "Beauty Shop" with Queen Latifah and in 1989's "Harlem Nights" with Eddie Murphy and Richard Pryor. After "Harlem Nights," Coleman's church — where Ms. Reese studied to be a minister — was bombarded with complaints about the language her character used in the film.

She appeared on dozens of other shows, including "Designing Women," "Picket Fences," "L.A. Law" and "MacGyver."

Ms. Reese died at her home in Encino, California, according to her Chicago friend Shell Reyes, who said she designed the wedding rings worn by Ms. Reese and her husband Franklin Lett.

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