

Nancy Wilson (1937-2018), an extraordinary singer who will be missed

John Andrews
19 December 2018

Nancy Wilson, one of the most active and distinctive American jazz and pop singers during the late 20th century and the first few years of the 21st, passed away after a long bout with kidney cancer on December 13. She was 81.

Ms. Wilson was a familiar and popular figure. She appeared regularly as an actor on television and in films, and for seven years her silky and mellifluous voice narrated the marvelous “Jazz Profiles” series for National Public Radio.

Raised by jazz-loving, working-class parents (her father an iron foundry worker, her mother a maid) in Chillicothe, Ohio, Ms. Wilson’s talent for singing emerged during childhood. By the age of 15 she was performing locally, including on television station WTVN, before completing high school and one year of college. Ms. Wilson then committed to a career in music and toured the Midwest and Canada with a minor dance band.

She recorded first for the uneven Dot label, which had started out with country western, but moved to New York City in 1959 and quickly hit the big time with Capitol Records, the home of Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole and the Stan Kenton Orchestra.

Capitol issued five well-recorded, popular and aesthetically pleasing albums of hers during the next two years, along with a number of hit singles, including “Guess Who I Saw Today,” which remained the singer’s signature tune.

From the beginning, Ms. Wilson inhabited the nether world between jazz, pop and rhythm-and-blues, with one foot firmly planted in the commercial world, but without ever compromising her gifts. Like one of her primary influences, Anita O’Day, Ms. Wilson considered herself a “song stylist” rather than a jazz singer.

Referring to the records she heard at home, Ms. Wilson once told the *Los Angeles Times* that “Much of my phrasing is so similar to Jimmy Scott’s,” a reference to the big-band vocalist whose high countertenor voice was frequently mistaken for a woman’s.

Under the guidance of alto saxophone giant Julian “Cannonball” Adderley and manager John Levy, Ms. Wilson was able to concentrate on sophisticated ballads and standards, releasing masterpiece albums backed by the George Shearing Quintet in 1961, and by Cannonball and his cornet-playing brother Nat Adderley in 1962. The records are filled with great American songs such as “On Green Dolphin Street” and “The Nearness of You.” A personal favorite of mine is “Never Will I Marry” with the Adderleys.

Ms. Wilson’s singles and albums topped the charts before rock music and soul largely took over the record business. During 1964 and 1965, Ms. Wilson had four separate albums in the Billboard top 10 and several more singles, including “(You Don’t Know) How Glad I Am,” her best seller.

Despite shifting public tastes, Ms. Wilson stayed true to her muse and regularly issued recordings until her final two albums “R.S.V.P. (Rare Songs, Very Personal)” in 2004, and “Turned to Blue” in 2006. Over her career, she received three Grammy awards.

With her natural beauty and grace, Ms. Wilson was a frequent guest on television variety shows, and hosted her own, “The Nancy Wilson Show,” during the 1967-1968 season, which earned an Emmy. She also appeared as an actor on episodes of *Burke’s Law*, *I Spy*, *The Red Skelton Hour*, *The Carol Burnett Show*, *Room 222*, *Hawaii Five-O*, and *The Cosby Show*, among many others.

Ms. Wilson appeared in four films. Her first role was

an uncredited one as a singer in the 1964 remake of *The Killers* (directed by Don Siegel), which was coincidentally Ronald Reagan's last (and best) role as an actor. Ms. Wilson's final role was playing herself in *The Naked Brothers Band: The Movie*, the 2005 children's movie.

As noted above, for seven years, starting with its inaugural episode in August 1995 to commemorate the 75th birthday of jazz genius Charlie Parker, Ms. Wilson hosted NPR's "Jazz Profiles." The shows generally ran a full hour and featured her intelligent narration of biographical details interspersed with key recordings of the selected artist.

Ms. Wilson was outspoken in her support for civil rights and participated in the 1965 march in Selma led by Martin Luther King.

I would characterize Ms. Wilson's singing as dominated by its sweet, but meaty timbre. Her intonation and pitch are always on target and she swings. Like Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Sarah Vaughn and Tony Bennett, Ms. Wilson belonged to a generation that always took great care to enunciate a given song's lyrics and perform it in a manner that conveyed its meaning. In "Guess Who I Saw Today," for example, Ms. Wilson greets her husband, who is arriving home late, and mixes him a martini. She then tells him a story, which ends up with his being seen in a bar with a paramour.

"I have a gift for telling stories, making them seem larger than life," she told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1993. "I love the vignette, the plays within the song."

My only criticism would be that Ms. Wilson's performances were a bit histrionic at times and, particularly in her later years, susceptible to vocal devices that distracted, but this is a minor quibble.

Ms. Wilson gave her last concert in her native Ohio during 2011 before retiring to her desert home in Pioneertown, California, an isolated community in the Southern California high desert, where she passed away surrounded by family.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact