

Versatile jazz artist Cassandra Wilson dies at 70

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6 September 2026

Renowned jazz artist Cassandra Wilson died in her hometown of Jackson, Mississippi September 2, at the age of 70. In her performances, she strove to break down stereotypes and expose listeners to music they might or might not have heard before, but which she presented in a fresh and original manner.

Wilson received her first Grammy nomination in 1995 for Best Jazz Vocal Album for her Blue Note release *Blue Light 'til Dawn*. The following year she spoke to *Time* magazine about her musical approach:

We live very segmented lives ... There's Black music and there's white music. There's R&B and funk and whatever. This has always bothered me. People don't see things in streams, they don't see what tends to connect us all together. That's what I see. That's what I try to get at.

There was a continuity in her approach and opinions. In an interview given last year in Mississippi, Wilson spoke about that earlier album and the Grammy nomination:

Now, what's interesting about this music, and this Grammy ... it was a new direction in jazz. No one had ever tried to do something like this. I was combining the blues, with jazz, with the music of Appalachian, with a little bit of rock, which is what we do here in Jackson. We are at the crossroads of the South, and so this is the music that I grew up listening to. But no one had ever tried to bring all of these influences

together in one big pie.

Though Wilson's most unmistakable musical attribute was her sultry contralto, she was not just a singer. She was proficient on several instruments and was the primary creative force in her production arrangements.

Most importantly, her music drew upon compositions without genre limitations. One of her most surprising efforts was "Last Train to Clarksville," a tune written for the Monkees' first NBC television season, aired in 1966. The group and television series of the same name was formed by media producers in part as an answer to the 1965 film *Help!* starring the Beatles.

The Monkees' version quickly became the band's biggest hit. It's an upbeat melody with a young man on the phone arranging for his lover to meet him at the train station to spend a last night together. But the final words "And I don't know if I'm ever coming home," were, though not obviously, a reference to the fate that every American young man had to consider as more and more were drafted to provide US military forces to fight and often die in Vietnam.

On her 1995 album, *New Moon Daughter*, Wilson included "Last Train to Clarksville." Her version evoked an entirely different feeling. From the first measure, the listener is forewarned to pay attention. This isn't the ditty that many may be familiar with. Minor intervals darken the mood and unusual instrumentation portrays a sense of foreboding that the story deserves.

Time called her "America's Best Singer" in 2001 after her third Grammy nomination for the album *Traveling Miles*. This was a tribute to Miles Davis and was based on the years she spent as the opening act for

the jazz artist.

The album release that got this reviewer's attention was *Belly of the Sun*, released in 2002. The opening tune was "The Weight," originally released by the Band in 1968. Her treatment employs an Afro-Cuban rhythm and a dreamy sensibility. She also performs "Darkness on the Delta" accompanied by a single acoustic piano. Notably, this song originally included a racist lyric depicting a post-Reconstruction idyllic imagery of cotton plantations, but Wilson's version lovingly depicts a time of day she enjoys about her home.

Other tunes from different sources on that album include, Antonio Carlos Jobim's "Waters of March," Jimmy Webb's "Wichita Lineman," Bob Dylan's "Shelter from the Storm" and Robert Johnson's "Hot Tamales."

Wilson was born Cassandra Fowkes in 1955 in Jackson, Mississippi to Herman Fowkes, Jr. and Mary McDaniel. Her father was a jazz guitarist and music teacher and her mother a school teacher, who also taught music. Cassandra's ethnic roots included Fon, Yoruba, Irish and Welsh.

She grew up in Jackson during a time of significant social strife: the Civil Rights movement era. When she was just seven, a riot at the University of Mississippi in Oxford erupted when James Meredith became the first black student to enroll. A year later, in Jackson, NAACP member Medgar Evers was assassinated outside his home by a white supremacist. When Cassandra was nine years old, Freedom Summer was organized to get blacks registered to vote provoking a massive terror campaign by racist forces.

Wilson's parents sheltered her from much this. She told a former schoolmate and lifelong friend in an interview in January, 2025 that her parents never went to places that displayed "whites only" signage. There were certain stores that blacks were allowed to patronize and that's where they shopped.

She had a happy childhood very much focused on music. She said:

Well, I cannot describe the wonder that was in the home that I grew up in. It was really beautiful music that we always listened to. My father, of course, was a jazz musician, and there was quite a large community of jazz musicians

back in the day, in the '50s and '60s, that I recall. And they had, you know, they had a way of gathering at different homes, and they would have performances across the river, you know, over in Pearl [Mississippi].

Education played a major role in Wilson's early life. What she has to say about it is of considerable significance today. She noted that "the love music" was something

you have to get ... very young. In order to, for it to expand and to grow up in individuals. It is important, I think, it's so, it's such a tragedy that the programs have been cut from our public schools. We don't have the same kind of funding for music, education, in schools anymore.

And that really, I think it shines a light inside of a young person's spirit. If you don't have that for children, they can go astray. Music is very important. Music, poetry, all of the arts. Very important.

Wilson made 16 studio albums and performed all her life until her untimely death. Every one of her albums and all of her performances are well worth listening to. She performed on nighttime television like David Letterman's show in 1996 and in concert. All of those recordings are now precious.



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