

CONTEMPORARY GOSPEL • ALTERNATIVE • METAL

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Donna McElroy—*She's Come a Long Way*

The past year has been one of changes for Donna McElroy, who has gone from being a popular background studio vocalist to releasing her own album on the Warner Alliance label to being nominated for Best Jazz Vocalist of 1990 for her rendition of the Duke Ellington standard, "Come Sunday." Donna has truly emerged as one of contemporary gospel's premier artists. *Inside Music* spoke with Donna recently about her life and career since the making of her debut album *Bigger World*.

You've stated in the past that *Bigger World* was an attempt to make contemporary gospel music to which today's urban youth, particularly black teens who listen to dance music, could relate. Is this what has happened?

I thought *Bigger World* would be a perfect vehicle to get in touch with the hearts of some of these kids. But as it turns out, the people who have really latched onto this album have been their parents or people my age or a little older who have been to college and seen what it's all about. That's o.k., too.

This is certainly one of the strongest efforts ever to put gospel into an urban contemporary setting. As such, is the album getting much mainstream airplay?

The album is being played primarily on Christian stations and that's all right because the songs are Christian songs. There has been no strong crossover material yet, but that's on the way. I feel that lyric content has everything to with how excited secular radio is about picking a song or an album up. I think these lyrics were so obviously Christian and praise-oriented that there was no way a radio station could slip these songs in and make listeners think that these were just some more pop songs. You can definitely dance to them, but I think it throws people



Donna McElroy

off when they hear things like "I live to know how deep and how wide DEAR LORD is the love of You."

Where did the idea to do "Come Sunday" originate?

I've wanted to sing "Come Sunday" since I was a child. I wanted to do it in a jazz setting and was encouraged to do it because my management knew it would be a priceless marriage. And there's more where that came from. We've gotten definite signals as a result of the Grammy nomination to do more jazz. So that's the direction we're heading on the next album. It will be much more mainstream jazz-sounding and will keep the same quality lyric content. People seem to be impressed that I'm not a traditional gospel singer but am someone who really has jazz skills. I'm a jazz singer in a gospel world. And I want to stay that way. I just don't think you have to limit gospel vocalizing to any certain style.

Can you discuss some of the inspirations for your songs?

"Bigger World" and "You're a Part of Me" are attempts to encourage people to broaden their horizons both mentally, physically, and

spiritually and not just live in a small circle. It has to do with racism and sexism and all oppression issues. That's where those two songs came from. The rest of the lyrics on the album are specifically my brand of praise, letting God know what He's done for me, and trying to sing it in a way that people would appreciate. Especially with "Everything to Me," I was just really wanting God to know how lost I am without Him. I thought I was cool but found out how utterly dependent and powerless I am without Him.

What kind of confirmation has the Lord been giving you that you're on the right track?

All the confirmation from outside that Book doesn't mean anything to me. I have trouble accepting compliments. But when I read it in the Book, I can't deny it. It's like God has been leading me to Scriptures, telling me, "Yeah, you're on the right track, now go for it."

Your vocal training took place through classical vocal studies at Fisk University. What was your musical background like at home when you were growing up?

Musically, there have been a lot of people I've admired and have been influenced by through the years. And I've been influenced by all kinds of music. Growing up, I got a well-rounded double dose of music every day of my life—jazz, classical, gospel, rock. In one room of my house it would be Mahalia playing. In another, it would be Sly and the Family Stone. In the back of the house my sister would be playing La Traviata. We had a wonderful, rich musical background at my house.

How would you sum up your life at this point?

The first thing that pops into my head is that I have a really long way to go. But Lord, look how far I've come! And I'm grateful.

Currently Donna is occupying her time promoting *Bigger World*, writing songs for her next album, and participating in studio work for other albums, including BeBe and CeCe's forthcoming release, which, Donna confides, "is going to be hot."

—David Thomas