

The Boston News

Interview

Lulu White

LULU White is a name known and respected throughout the jazz world as one of the finest singers of New Orleans music — on both sides of the Atlantic.

This Boston lady, real name Sandra Walker, is the first — and so far only — European ever to have been invited to sing in Preservation Hall, the very heartland of New Orleans jazz.

The music she sings is deeply rooted in the history of New Orleans and, as Glyndebourne is to opera and Nashville is to country music, so Preservation Hall is where only the very best New Orleans musicians are considered good enough to perform.

For a white singer — and British at that — to have gained such overwhelming acceptance from the cream of America's traditional 'black' musicians is a measure not only of her undoubted singing talent, but her wholehearted involvement in the New Orleans scene.

Lulu was born in Boston, the daughter of a former professional boxer, and she has lived in the town all her life. As a young child, her favourite listening was Radio Luxembourg with which she used to sing along.

"By the time I was in my teens I knew all the words and tunes of the songs that were played — from Connie Francis and Shirley Bassey ballads to the pop songs of Elvis and the Beatles and, of course, rock and roll."

Lulu was educated at Carlton Road and Kitwood Girls, but, not realising then that music was to take over her life, she did not have any special tuition.

"When I left school, my sister was courting a boy who had a band — piano, drums and guitar. This was Frank Padley's band, who played in pubs and clubs in and around Boston and were very popular. I used to sing with them from time to time."

Lulu won a couple of talent competitions while on holiday at Skegness but when she got married and had a daughter, Paula, her singing "took a back seat."

Another seven years passed before she resumed her singing career — and that was largely by accident.

"One night, I happened to go to the Boston Jazz Club which met then above the Copper Kettle. The band playing was the Pilgrim Stompers, led by cornet player John Paddon. My friend suggested that I have a sing, but I didn't know any jazz songs so she asked him for some material for me to have a look at. I ended up singing 'Bill Bailey'."

John Paddon liked what he heard and he brought Lulu "a heap of records" for her to listen to and learn the songs.

"John then decided that I might be able to sing, but it would take five years to learn the style. That was 15 years ago and he was right!"

John had just come back from his first trip to New Orleans, and was full of the enthusiasm which spurs him still. Lulu continued learning songs and refining her style and the following year, John took her with him to America.

"I learned so much while I was there. I watched blues singers, gospel, how the band played — I took it all in. New Orleans jazz has a style all of its own. It's not trad jazz, or dixieland, or any of the commercial sounds you tend to associate with jazz."

Lulu had her first real singing lesson from one of the most famous musicians of the time — Alton Purnell, a renowned piano player with the bands of Bunk Johnson and George Lewis.

"He, like most of the jazz players, was a friend of John's and on a visit to England, he came to stay in Boston to play with John's band. He sat at my piano in the front room, teaching me how to sing."

Another of her mentors and friends was Louis Nelson who, until his death, was a frequent visitor to Boston when he crossed the Atlantic for European tours.

Lulu's cosy house is a veritable hall of fame. Pictures, programmes, letters, messages and mementoes of her career and famous visitors cover the walls.

"The whole market came to a halt and people were standing there with tears running down their faces"



Lulu singing with the world-famous Razzberrie Ragtime Band at the Blue Angel in New Orleans. On the strength of her first performance there, she was offered a job singing five nights a week — at \$600 a night.

A lady with real star quality

She and John are even mentioned in an American book written about the history of Preservation Hall, the mecca of the New Orleans jazz world.

Very few white singers — even Americans — have ever been invited to perform at Preservation Hall. On a visit to New Orleans, Lulu was singing at the Maison Bourbon and, unknown to her, the owner of the Hall was watching from behind a pillar.

"After listening to Lulu sing, he gave the band permission to invite her to sing at the Hall" recalls John proudly. "It was an incredible honour, but the first time I sang there, I was so nervous!" Lulu remembers.

Lulu has visited New Orleans every year since 1976, staying with friends and singing at all the traditional venues for the music, including the Natchez and Creole Queen paddle steamers on the Mississippi river. While on a trip to New Orleans, Lulu was offered a job at the Blue Angel, singing five nights a week for \$600 a night — she turned it down.

She has also been a regular singer at major venues in this country, including the 100 Club in London.

Although tempted to turn professional, Lulu was unwilling to leave her family in Boston and felt that she would have needed to live in a big city such as Manchester or London in order to make a living.

"The other problem was that there were very

club at Louth on a Saturday night, where the resident band is the South Wold and Lulu is also the vocalist. Attendances can be anything up to 100 people.

With John's many friends and contacts in the music world, famous guests also tend to 'drop in' and play with the bands.

Their playing is not confined to clubs. When a fellow jazz-lover died, Lulu and John organised a real New Orleans funeral for him in Boston.

"The traditional music for funerals is so moving, and we are both used to seeing people join in the street processions in New Orleans. But we were amazed when we marched through Boston on a Wednesday afternoon, the entire market came to a halt and local people were standing there with tears running down their cheeks, listening to the funeral hymns."

Lulu also sings with a national band, the Mahogany Hall Stompers.

This band is made up of the top jazz musicians from all over the country, and they were brought together originally by John. She has a much-treasured tape recording of a concert with this band, although sadly, they have not made any commercial records.

In March, at a special Mardi Gras celebration at Frithville, Lulu will be singing with the New Orleans Gospel Band in aid of St Peter's Church.

Neither Lulu nor John has much time for the 'popular' forms of jazz and current music trends.

"The musicians are so uptight, the tunes are unrecognisable and the music seems to be all loud guitar-strumming. New Orleans is easy, relaxed and has strong melodies that everybody knows. In New Orleans, the musicians play with a smile on their faces."

Lulu wears traditional 1920s clothes when on stage and has some of her costumes made in Boston by Marilyn at Violet Love's. She also has an original gospel gown which she bought in Louisiana.

Her repertoire now includes over 450 songs and with her rich, full voice, she looks set to delight audiences for many years to come.

"All the top New Orleans bands still had day jobs!"



few bands playing true New Orleans music — mostly they pandered to the white people and played the sort of music that made money. All the top New Orleans bands still had day jobs!"

Although this music is largely the domain of black people, her stage name, Lulu White, has nothing to do with colour.

"When I began singing, I gradually acquired the nickname of 'Lulu.' And when I first went to New Orleans, people began to say 'Here comes Lulu White,' as a bit of a joke."

"Unfortunately for me, Lulu White was the name of the most famous 'madam' in the district of Storyville, New Orleans, where the 'sporting houses' were. Lulu White's place was called Mahogany Hall, on Basin Street, and she used to have jazz bands playing there to entertain customers who were waiting. The name stuck!"

Lulu now sings only as a hobby but is a regular at the Boston jazz club where the local seven-piece band, the Pilgrim Stompers, plays "purely for the fun of it" every Sunday night at Blackfriars Revue Bar from 8.30pm.

John Paddon runs this and the New Orleans



Lulu White and the Pilgrim Stompers performing at Blackfriars.