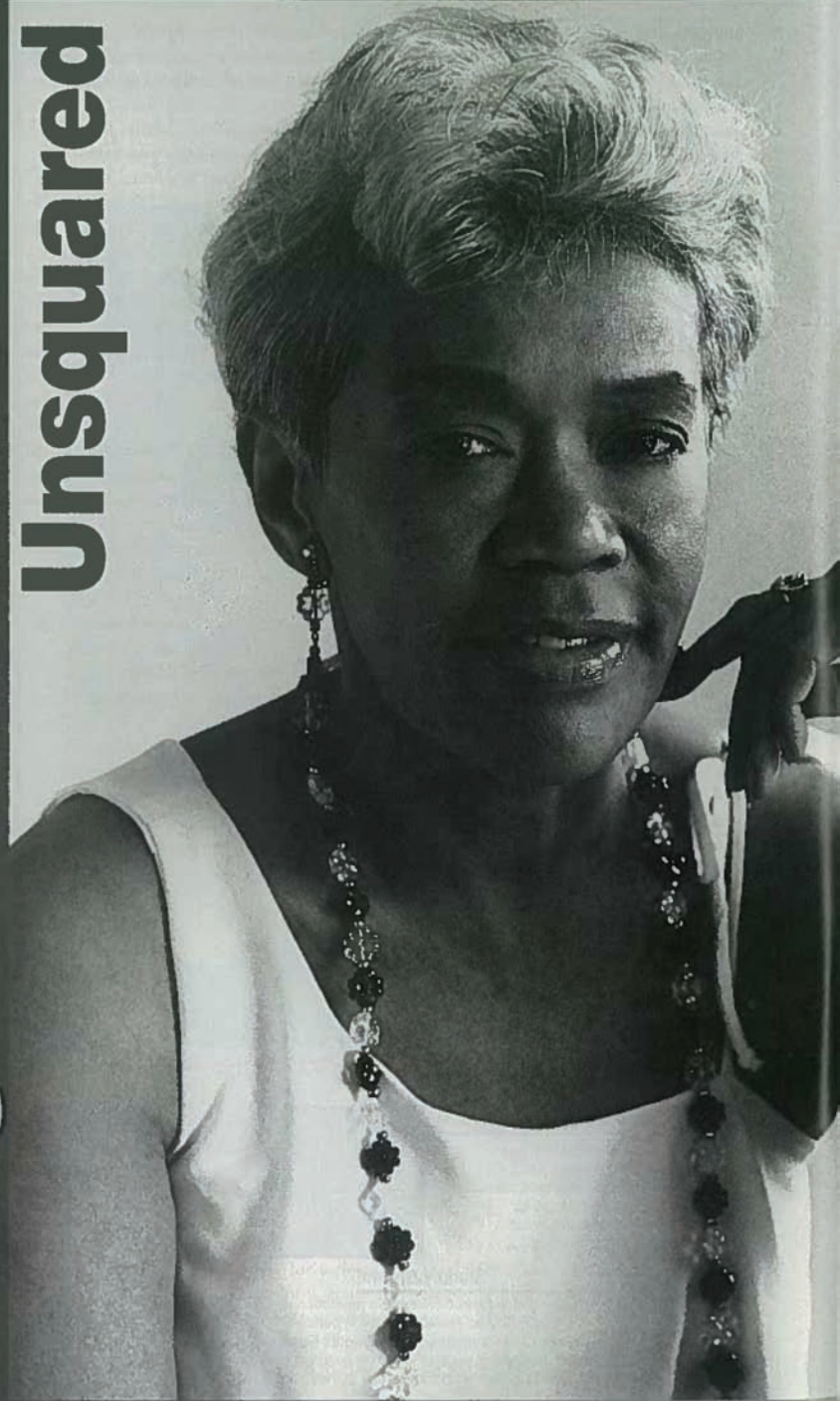


Refined Reflections Sugar Pie Desanto

Unsquared



It's a February evening at San Francisco's Biscuits & Blues, a hip, upscale joint renowned for its music and menu. Sugar Pie DeSanto's band, the All-Stars, hits the stage at 8:45 p.m. The core of the band that played on DeSanto's latest album, *Refined Sugar* — drummer Minor Williams, guitarist Steve Gannon, keyboardist Sugar G. Robinson, and bassist Mark Cvitkovich — lays down a tight groove, augmented on this night by the Sweet Meat Horns and harmonica player Spencer Jarrett.

The band plays "I'd Rather Drink Muddy Water" as a prelude to Sugar Pie's entrance. The queen of West Coast blues hits the stage at 9:05. Her black mini-dress fitting a body most 30-year-olds would envy, DeSanto kicks off her shoes and goes to work. As Williams begins to count off "I Need Help," DeSanto stops the band on the one, saying, "Hold it. I tell you when to play." Then, to the crowd: "I run them. They don't run me."

Without stopping, the band segues into "I Want To Know," the 1960 single that became the diminutive singer's first hit. DeSanto masterfully builds tension before forming a dance line in front of the stage and exhorting the crowd to follow her. At one point, she jumps into a patron's lap and pulls him onto the dance floor.

Spotlighting material from the new album — including the Jimmy McCracklin-penned "Blues Hall of Fame" — DeSanto gives the audience what it wants. As band members take solos, she encourages them to "get your funk on." Introducing the closing number, "In the Basement," DeSanto remarks, "I don't have Etta [James, her Chess Records labelmate] to help me. I'll help myself." By the time she finishes, the crowd is demanding an encore. She gamely complies.

DeSanto's songbook totals well over 100 compositions; they've been recorded by the likes of the Whispers, the Dells, Minnie Riperton, Little Milton, Billy Stewart, and other artists. She took time to speak with *Blues Revue* earlier this year.

How did your musical development begin?
My mother was a concert pianist. My good ears come from her. She taught me how to sing. I taught myself to play piano by ear.

When did you start performing?
When I was about 11 or 12, I started singing around the neighborhood. I started winning talent shows at about 14. Rockin' Lucky, the DJ of KDIA, hosted many of them.

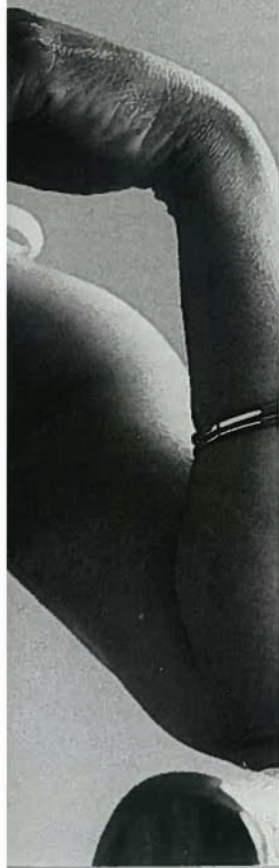
You have a connection to Etta James.
She was raised with us in the same San Francisco neighborhood. Her and my sister are the same age. Though I have about five years on her, we all went to the same schools. Her and my sister had a group, the Peaches. We're like cousins. She stayed with us. My father loved her like a daughter.

You began working with Johnny Otis in 1955. How did he come into the picture?
Johnny Otis offered me a contract after hearing me at a talent show that I won.

Did he already have Etta James and Little Esther Phillips at that point?
Yes, he'd already signed the both of them. After he signed me, he took me to Los Angeles for my first recording session in 1954-55. My first single was called "Boom Diddy Wawa, Baby" b/w "I Love You," on the Federal label.

After that, how did you build your career?
Well, I started growing up a little bit, venturing out of town to gig in places like Stockton and Vallejo. I met my first husband, guitarist Pee Wee Kingsley, while we were both gigging in Stockton at different clubs. People were talking about the little "foreign woman" who was in town singing at a club. He decided to come check me out and liked what I was doing. We decided to hook up, and he became my husband and my band director.

Did you record together?
Yeah. In 1959, I wrote a song called "I Want To Know." I took it to Bob Geddins, who owned the Veltone label and did so much for West Coast blues. I told him I thought I



Manager Jim Moore on Sugar Pie DeSanto: 'Quit flyin' around the ceiling!'

“I remember the first time I met Sugar Pie. I'd seen her perform before but had never talked to her. I was hanging around Bob Geddins' studio and she came in with her then-husband, Pee Wee Kingsley. Sugar Pie was walking fast, fast, fast. She announced, 'Bob, I think I got one!'

"Bob Geddins talked real slow in his Texas drawl. He said, 'Yeah, let me hear it.'

"After hearing it, Bob told them, 'Come back tonight. We gonna cut it.' They returned that night. Johnny Heartsman and, I believe, Bob Geddins Jr., along with Pee Wee Kingsley, played on the session. I can't remember the rest of the personnel. But the rest is history. The master was bought by Chess, and Sugar Pie went to Chicago. I didn't see her again for a long time.

"The next time I saw her was when she opened for Jackie Wilson at the Sportsman Club in Oakland. Man, guys were standing on the tables to get a look when she hit the stage. I believe that was the most incredible show I've seen in my life. When Sugar Pie came out of the dressing room she was already four feet off the ground. She hit the stage flying. Of course, this made Jackie Wilson come out six feet in the air, hit the splits as soon as he hit the stage, and he just tore up the house.

"I went backstage and gave Sugar Pie my card and told her, 'If you quit flyin' around the ceiling and settle down and sing, you could be a star.'

"Two or three years later, early one morning, there was a knock on my door. It was Sugar Pie. I was surprised she still had my card. 'You said you could make me a star. Well, here I am!' So we drew up a contract. This was around the early '70s.

"The first song Sugar Pie and I wrote together was titled 'Enemy.' It had kind of a jazz flavor. A big band sound with tympani and soulful piano by Lonnie Hewitt. To give you some background on how we wrote that, I can tell you that, in the early days, Sugar Pie was always in trouble. We had set her up to do a spot on the Flip Wilson show. Prior to that date, we were in the studio recording, and her boyfriend at the time burst in, angry at God knows what, took her out of there, and wouldn't let her do the show. When she and I talked about it later, I told her, 'Sugar Pie, you're your own worst enemy!'

"She said, 'Yeah, you right. Hey, that's a tune! Let's find a piano.' So we went down to the California Hotel and put it together."

—Thurman J. Watts

had a hit record. After hearing it, he got real excited and said, "Yeah, I think you do have one."

Chess Records bought "I Want To Know" and offered me a nice contract. I moved to Chicago for seven years and became the Chess brothers' highest-paid writer. They recorded me, but shelved me so as not to hurt Etta's sales. We sounded so much alike that they figured we could do some duets. I didn't particularly like being held back, but Leonard Chess was especially good to me.

We also recorded on Rhythm Records, owned by Don Barksdale, who played for the Boston Celtics. Don became my manager.

I heard you talk recently about getting stopped in Macon, Georgia, during your travels with Kingsley.

What a mess. I'll never forget it. We were driving through town, doing about 25 or 30 miles an hour. The sheriff pulled us over and said we were doing 55. In those days, my complexion was lighter than it is now, and my hair was down to the bend in my knee. They thought I was a white woman! They arrested both of us. They released me, but held Pee Wee on bogus white slavery charges for two days. They impounded the car. The cop that arrested us was the jailer, the deputy, the judge, and the mayor. He was everything in the town.

Tell us about the 1964 American Folk Blues Festival that toured Europe.

I was the only woman invited to be on the tour, which included Willie Dixon, Sonny Boy Williamson, Sleepy John Estes, Sunnyland Slim, Hubert Sumlin, Lightnin' Hopkins, Howlin' Wolf, and others. Everyone was trying to hit on me.

Howlin' Wolf, too?

Everybody. Trying to buy me flowers and take me to dinner. I told them all, I said, "No honey. Don't want none." They'd ask why. I'd say, "Cause you too old. I don't like old men. Never have. They make me feel old. I've never had an old man."

Let's back up. You opened for James Brown for a couple of years. Tell us how you met Brown and came to work for him.

I met James when I was working the

Apollo in the wake of my hit record. Back East there was a chain of theaters — the Howard in Washington, the Royal in Baltimore, the Regal in Chicago, and the Apollo in New York. You couldn't get in unless you were hot or had a hit record. And you just played one after the other. Of course, the biggest was the Apollo. If you could make it there, you could make it anywhere. That's where I ran into James Brown.

Was he hard to work for?

No. We got along real well. The only thing was, we had a little competition. 'Cause, you know, I'm a hard worker. In other words, I made it kind of hard for the brother, 'cause after I got through, he sure 'nuff had to go to work, you know what I mean? We always got along, no problem. I made it understood from the beginning that there wouldn't be no "going together." You know, he goes with most of his women. So it ain't gonna be none of that, brother! No hanky-panky. Keep your hands to yourself. You want me with you, you pay me, I'll go on before you, warm it up for you — and that's it.

I thought he was quite nice. I stayed with him two years. At the end of that time, I figured that as hard as I was working, I could pull a show on my own. That's when I decided to come back to the Bay Area and get back on my own.

When did you and Bob Geddins write "Hello San Francisco"? Was it around the time you stopped working for Brown?

No, we wrote that during the time of "I Want To Know." Bob Geddins helped a

Selected Discography

Sugar Pie DeSanto (1961)
Checker 2979

*Down in the Basements:
The Chess Years* (1989)
MCA 9275

A Slice of Pie (2000)
Jasman 1005

Refined Sugar (2006)
Jasman 1006

lot of people. A lot of local blues artists couldn't get out there, get exposure, without Bob. He was very well-known as a blues figure on the West Coast. I can't remember the names of all the people he helped, but Johnny Heartsman, Johnny Talbot, Vernon Garrett, Lowell Fulson — even the Whispers were around in the early days.

How often do you go to the gym?

Twice a week. I also have a machine at home to do my leg work. Gotta keep it up. What you don't use, you lose.

Did you ever meet Sam Cooke or Billie Holiday?

I met Sam, but not Billie. I also met Sarah Vaughan, who is one of my favorites. I never got to do a show with Sam. Seems like I was always hitting town when he was leaving, or vice versa.

Do you have a particular creed or philosophy that's helped you live your life and run your career?

I've worked with some unscrupulous producers in my day. I won't even mention them by name, 'cause they're all gone. I'm still here.

You see, God doesn't like ugly, nor thievery. Whatever you're gonna do, do it to the best of your ability, as long as you don't hurt anyone in the process. That's the way I've lived my life. I'm not gonna cheat anybody or steal nothin'. I'm the kind of person that if I see somethin' and I want it, I'm gonna come in your face. I'm gonna say, "Hey, you see that \$100 over there? What about it?" If you say no, cool. See, if you're honest, you'll be all right. A sneak ain't gonna last but so long.

To what do you owe your longevity in show business?

I've always given my all, man! Show business is my life. I wouldn't trade it for anything. 'Cause when I walk on and hear those screams, when they give me my props after a song or two, there's nothin' like it in the world. Not good food, sex — nothin' beats that, because it's in my blood. If I couldn't do it, I'd die.

One thing I've learned in life in 70 years is that whatever befalls you as an individual, you have to deal with it. Don't

worry about what someone else may do. Do it yourself and you know it's being done right. With the help of God, you can do wonders. That's what helped me get through the troubles I had in my younger life — the heavy drinking, mixing it with the weed. I was out there for a minute, brother. I had to pull myself back and take a rain check. Said to myself, "Sugar, what's wrong with you? You gettin' older now. You can't make it

performing like this." So I just cut it all. I'm tryin' to keep my health.

Let me tell you my biggest dream. If it ever happens, I'll quit music, just walk away. I want to appear at Carnegie Hall. I want to present tunes I wrote for myself.

But if you tell them you'll quit, you might not get the gig.

Man, you know I ain't gonna quit! ■