

Darlene D Creates Magic In Stage Performances

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By Orla Swift - Meriden Record-Journal

Pop singer Darlene "D" would probably make a great talk show host.

"I'm more interested in my audience than they are in me," says the 24-year-old Hamden resident. "I'd like to go up to every one of them and just say, 'What did you do on Sunday?' I'm not nosy, just interested. I want to know what they're thinking."

Rest easy, Phil Donahue, Darlene's too busy to grab a mic and prance around asking people questions. She's got a record to promote.

Tonight, Darlene D will host a record release party at the Atlantis International Night Club in Branford to celebrate the completion of her debut album, Safari Hunter.

The daughter of Thomas "Doc" Cavalier, a producer and director of Wallingford's Trod Nossel Recording Studios, Darlene D has been composing music since before she could read.

Her recording career got off to a solid start when one of her songs - "Tricky Ricky," about an ex-boyfriend - was included on a locally produced compilation album that was sent to radio stations and dance clubs throughout the Northeast.

That song garnered heavy airplay and led to her first stage performance a year ago this week. Since then, Darlene's following has grown so large that people she's never seen before are asking for her autograph.

"I think of me as me, I don't think of me as 'I want your autograph,'" she said in an interview at Trod Nossel, where she helps out when she's not busy writing and recording.

"It's just so simple to me. It's just music, something I like to do. I'll always like to do it. When I have a family, they'll probably be musical too."

Indeed, Darlene D was born into a musical family. Her father, a former dentist, managed the '60's rock group, The Shaggs, before taking over Trod Nossel in 1967. Her grandfather on her mother's side sang in a barbershop quartet and in minstrel shows. Her brothers, Rob and Tommy, perform in a rock duo call "Cavalier." Rob is also a songwriter, guitarist and recording engineer, and Tommy performs in Darlene's live show.

Darlene began her musical training with a piano instruction book her father gave her when she was 6. She also took lessons from her aunt, until her aunt moved away, leaving young Darlene with nothing but a phonograph and some 45 rpm singles to guide her.

"I just played, I played all the time," she calls. "My family would say, 'Would you shut up?' I mean, they were happy I was interested, but it was like, 'come on!'"

Enthralled by music, Darlene would play from morning until night. The sound of her playing took her through all the highs and lows in her life.

"I would sit there with my eyes shut and play because it relaxed me," says Darlene, who also took

voice placement lessons. "If I was aggravated, I'd be banging on the keys. You could always tell what kind of mood I was in by how I played."

Recognizing his daughter's gift, Darlene's father brought home a talent scout one day, and asked Darlene to sing a song.

"I was so embarrassed. I didn't feel like I could sing," she recalls. "Even when they said 'Well, just play something then,' my fingers tightened up. I had only played for ME."

Though her father encouraged her in her musical pursuits, Darlene stresses that she and her brothers were never forced to perform.

"Even when I started to express interest it was never like, 'Let's go! Let's do it!'" she says. "Even to this day, he's not like that. He just wants us to do what we want."

Darlene's first break came when she gave a tape of her songs to Atlantis owner J.D. DeMatteo, who at the time owned the now-defunct Wallingford dance club, Shaharazod.

After hearing her tape, "He said to me 'Whatever you want,'" she recalls. "I was like, 'Wow!' You know? 'He must really like my stuff.'"

Darlene put together her first stage act in just six weeks, with the help of her friends Margaret Thompson and Denise Cantarella, professional dancers who perform and sing in Darlene's show. The three-song spectacle drew rave reviews from the packed house.

"After the show, J.D. came back and said, 'Please remember me when you're big,'" she recalls with a grin.

"Darlene D is one of the few, if not the only, entertainers that we allowed to play in one of my clubs who is not of national status," said DeMatteo.

Each time Darlene plays there, he says, she invariably packs the place with almost 1,000 fans.

"I haven't the faintest idea why," said DeMatteo, whose club - like most venues these days - is hard-pressed to draw a capacity crowd even when it features nationally known bands. "She's very energetic, her choreography is wonderful, and she's an excellent singer. But to command that kind of audience on a consistent basis is extremely unusual."

"She's got the magic, there's no doubt about it, she's definitely got the magic," he said. "I have no doubt she's going to springboard into international fame."

Since her stage debut, Darlene has also performed several times at Confetti's, a dance club in her hometown. Her show is about 40 minutes long and includes seven songs. She notes that she never lip-syncs, though she does use supporting tracks to tide her over when she's out of breath from dancing.

"She's a real dedicated performer and a very nice person, a great person to work with," says Confetti's general manager Jeffrey Topolski. "She's very professional. She cares about her craft, and she's got quite a following too."

Safari Hunter features seven original songs and a brightly arranged cover of the classic hit, "Where Did Our Love Go." Darlene's bubbly soprano vocals are reminiscent of Donna Summer's and

Madonna's early recordings, though her keyboard style brings to mind the '80s British dance club sound of Yaz.

Though some cuts are stronger than others, the album far surpasses many major-label dance albums released this year.

Darlene now spends her days rehearsing her stage show, writing new material, making new contacts in the business and helping out around the studio. She has no free time and, she readily admits, "no social life."

"You have to work your butt off," says Darlene, whose friends have nicknamed her "The Fuhrer."

"If you're not willing to work your butt off, whatever it takes to get the work done, you're not going to make it."

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