

Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 25
LaVern Baker

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast. I'm Susan Stone. The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women who achieved impressive things against all odds while they were alive. The show was recorded in front of a delightful audience in Berlin and beyond. And here on the podcast, we bring you a special sampling from these events. Dead Ladies Show co-founder Florian Duijsens is here with me today. Hey there.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Hi, Susan. So glad to be here!

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to Episode 25! We made, it we made it! And this is also kicking off our third season — three is the magic number — with this episode. And we have a story told by our dear co-founder, other co-founder, Katy Derbyshire.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Yes! Katy, as you might know, is a translator. As you might not know, she's a very avid and skilled blues dancer. Since very recently last week, I want to say, she's the publisher of a brand new imprint called V&Q books, which publishes remarkable writing from Germany into English.

SUSAN STONE: That last fact is new and fantastic. But I want to talk a little bit about the other part — about the blues dancing. And the reason why is this talk is what I call a command performance. Because I commanded her to redo it for us! Because Katy told the story at our second-ever live show back in 2015. What a fabulous show that was.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: I remember it like it was yesterday.

SUSAN STONE: And it was not — so long ago. And it is about pioneering R&B singer LaVern Baker, such a fabulous lady. And this seemed like a perfect fit for Katy to retell LaVern's story to her blues dancing companions at a session in Berlin's Maerz. And now we're going to share it with you. Here's Katy:

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Hello! Okay, there's a little interruption to the dancing, about 20 minutes while I show you this thing, pull up a chair. You can come closer if you like, but you don't have to. There's no audience participation. And I'm probably not going to spit very much.

So I have everything set up. Here's my little altar, here. My picture that usually lives in my front room on the top of the shelf. This is LaVern Baker. She was an R&B singer. She's remembered from the very early days of what became known as rock'n'roll, but actually her career began and ended with the blues. She was a great performer with amazing charisma and a great sense of humor.

She was probably we're not quite sure, born Dolores LaVern Baker in Chicago in 1929. She hinted in an interview that her father may have been a gangster. We know we're not sure about that. But we do know that his sister — her father's sister — her auntie — is this woman on the left, Merline Johnson, who was a blues singer. And I don't know if you recognize this woman on the right, this is Memphis Minnie, a more famous blues singer, who she was distantly related to. If you read things, sometimes they say she was her aunt, but she wasn't. Certainly both of these women were huge role models for LaVern.

She started singing — guess where — at church. And at the age of 10, she won her first amateur club contest jitterbugging on stage with a friend and then they said, "Can you do anything else?" And she went on to sing. And they gave her a job at the age of 10. At this club, working on the weekends LaVern earned \$5 a night. When the police came around, she would just hide. And she made her first recording for RCA Records at she said, "12, 13 or 14;" she couldn't quite remember. Her first official billing though, was at the Club DeLisa in Chicago. Here it is, they look like they're having fun, this is in 1942.

LaVern first official billing was in 1947, when she was 17. She was on the bill as Little Miss Sharecropper, hideous name, that you can't really see because it's a tiny photo blown up really big. But she used to go on stage in pigtails and these tattered overalls, and she was kind of copying another artist. Being precocious, she got married at 18 to this post office worker called Eugene Williams, and got divorced two years later. Yes. By 1950, though, she was headlining at Chicago clubs, and became a local star. She was billed as the 'Empress of the Blues,' which is what Bessie Smith would be known as, and her aunt Merline was billed as the 'Queen of the Blues,' so they would occasionally appear together.

And then she moved on to Detroit, where she started playing for more racially mixed audiences, and she changed — thank goodness — she changed her stage name in 1952. To her manager, she said, "I don't like this 'Little Miss Sharecropper' thing. I want to wear pretty gowns and stuff like that."

Also in 1952, she had her first TV appearances and played it Alan Freed's first R&B concerts. I'm going to show you Alan Freed. There you go. As you can see, he was a white radio DJ. And he — this is man who invented the term rock n' roll, for what was essentially rhythm and blues. He championed the music and

promoted it to white audiences. He gave it that new name and suddenly it was in fashion. In 1953, LaVern moved to New York and signed to Atlantic Records. She was earning apparently \$300 a week by the point. She always she said she had a really great press man, so I don't know if we can believe how much she was earning every time it says in the press, so take it with a pinch of salt.

I think fairly soon she went on tour in Europe, but she got a call from her manager saying, "Come back home, come home. You've got a hit record." And here it is. 'Soul on Fire.' You can if you will, yes you can read it because it says very large now. They cut your mouth so she called co wrote her first hit. It's beautiful song you can listen to it as velvety and sensuous it really uses her voice and it was followed very quickly by us next smash hit 'Tweedlee Dee' in 1954. Remember that name.

'Tweedlee Dee,' as you can imagine was much tamer than 'Soul on Fire.' but it was suitable for the radio, and it became what was called the first major rock n' roll hit. It also became one of us signature song. He can see she's billed as 'LaVern Baker, the Tweedlee Dee Girl Herself' — what a name. And there followed a string of twee hits with innocuous lyrics. Basically, they were written to get teenagers they put money in jukeboxes, and they worked — teenagers had money for the first time in the 50s. But LaVern was a sexy black woman wearing tight dresses with this suggestive stage presence. She used to actually get people very worked up. One time she was playing in Brooklyn, and this fan came on stage screaming and bit into her hand, and LaVern carried on playing, with this man, like, hanging by the teeth from her hand. I'm going to show you a little video — I hope it works — of her 1957, so you can see what I'm talking about, that presence that she has. You can see that she's working with her body and her face.

VIDEO CLIP FROM 'MISTER ROCK AND ROLL': ALAN FREED: We'll keep spinning those rock and roll hits like this one coming up right now: LaVern Baker with 'Love Me Right in the Morning.' (MUSIC)

KATY DERBYSHIRE: I think when she was singing that song, 'Love Me Right in the Morning.' she was thinking something else to those teenagers. Anyway, I don't know. So here you can see — I put up the sheet music to that second hit Tweedlee Dee. And this is clearly not LaVern on the photo, because this is the first baddie of the story. This is Georgia Gibbs, who very swiftly covered that record using exactly the same musicians and the exact same arrangement. Yes, the thing is, the white radio stations weren't playing LaVern's version. And until recently, American R&B charts registered sales to black customers — they were originally called the race charts — and the pop charts registered sales to white customers. And LaVern's version didn't into the pop charts for airplay. But it did

get to number 14 on the jukebox charts which I guess is like the SoundCloud charts? What would that be — iTunes charts? And number 22 on record sales. Okay. Georgia Gibbs' version got to number three on the jukebox chart, number three on record sales and number two on airplay. And it stayed in the charts for 19 weeks.

LaVern Baker estimated she lost \$15,000 on that one record alone to Gibbs. Gibbs also — more fool her — covered the rather dull song Tra La La in 1956, which was stupid because that was the Flipside to 'Jim Dandy,' which became another of LaVern's signature tunes and got to number one on the R&B charts and number 17 on the pop charts. So anyway, Baker wrote her congressman to protest, and the law was eventually changed so that you can't do the same arrangement anymore. You have to pay if you do. When she was boarding a plane to Australia in 1957 LaVern made Gibbs the beneficiary of her life insurance policy. If she died, she said, "Gibbs would have no one left to copy." (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

So she was famous though, her she is just being famous. She was famous and fabulous. Yeah! She had a versatile voice, it was strong and sexy, and she knew how to growl. But she and Atlantic Records both wanted to make a good living. So a lot of her hits were quite simple, especially to begin with, and didn't show of her ability. She did have about 30 of them though, from 1955 to the early 60s. She was a star, she appeared in Alan Freed's incredibly bad film, 'Rock, Rock, Rock!' in 1956. I watched it so you didn't have to — don't. And in 1957, in 'Mister Rock and Roll.' which is what that clip was from. Here's the film poster, you can see she's got fairly high billing, and the poster is — I don't know if anybody's seen 'Hairspray?' It is kind of based around these awful, awful films, but much better. She made TV appearances. She sang duets with Ben E. King before he was famous. Jimmy Ricks, Jackie Wilson — we'll come to him later.

She made eight albums, which is a sign of how successful she was because most singers weren't even making albums in those days, and those albums included gospel songs and Bessie Smith covers. They showed a really much more mature side to her and of course her love of blues. Here comes the cover. It's a little bit racy for 1958. Basically what she's wearing is nothing at all apart from red lipstick. She said, "If we do this is Bessie Smith album, I have to do it my way." And the sleeve notes say, "The surprising thing is that she attacks some of these tunes as a young Bessie might, with a strong beat, and a feeling of great solidity in the melodic line — not in an attempt to sound like Bessie, but because she feels the lyrics and the songs. Not only are Bessie's songs interpreted with freshness and originality — in devoting herself to this task, LaVern has done something completely new, different stylistically from her previous work." And you can tell these notes are from the conductor, because it

says, “Backing her is jazz with a jolt, every instrument in fine form, every instrumentalist an outstanding contemporary jazz artist.”

Most of her work though, was live performance. She would tour in package shows like this one that you can see on the poster — that’s Clyde McPhatter over there, and I forgot who the other guy is. Oh, it’s Sam Cooke up in the top left. I don't know who these other people are — I can’t read the writing, it is too small. From 1957 as you can see, those shows are racially integrated. So she was singing duets with white men, which hadn't really been done on stage before.

In the South, where the audiences were still segregated, there would be a rope down the middle of the auditorium with the white kids on one side and black kids on the other. The black artists weren't allowed to buy food in the same places or use the same toilets or stay in the same hotels as the white artists. There were riots before the show in Montgomery, Alabama. And the whole thing was mentally and physically exhausting. I think she was on tour for 85 days in a row one time. We're coming to baddie number two, and I'm not going to show him. I'm showing you the fur coat that he bought her instead. In 1959, LaVern Baker married the comedian Melvin ‘Slappy’ White, who started out as Dinah Washington's chauffeur. Can I give you all a piece of advice? Don't marry someone whose name is Slappy!

AUDIENCE LAUGHS

KATY DERBYSHIRE: You think it would be a clue, right?

AUDIENCE: Yeah!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Right? You’re like “Slappy, I love you, let's get —“ no! Let me read you what it says here, it says, “Clad in mink coats valued at a total of \$15,000, singers Dinah Washington and LaVern Baker team up to belt out a tune in a Chicago Bistro. Miss Washington's coat was Christmas present from an admirer. Miss Baker's was a gift from comic Slappy White.” So he gave her this mink coat and she married him. The announcement said, “The bride was attired in a tan tweed suit, mink coat with matching hat” — at least he got her a matching hat, right — “tan shoes and accessories.” Yeah, didn't last all that long. Second husband, it was her husband after the divorce at age 20. Right.

So from the early 60s, LaVern aimed to play prestigious venues as an all rounder, like Dinah Washington, who we just saw, and Sammy Davis, Jr. And she did get solo shows in nightclubs from then. From 1961 on, she supported Louis Armstrong, and had her own shows as well. She did a lot of ballads and

torch songs, but it was hard for her to shake her old image. She was great on stage. She copied a lot of the patter and jokes from Slappy — at least that was something that he left her. But from the mid 60s her star was fading while Slappy's career peaked in a performance at the White House, and Aretha Franklin became the star at Atlantic. Still, she played a lot for servicemen.

She went to Vietnam during the war in 1970, and went on an independent tour of Army bases. While she was there, she fell ill with pneumonia, but she went on touring — such a professional. She went on to Thailand and Hong Kong when she was rushed to hospital, of course on the closing night. Rumor has it that Slappy filed for divorce at that point. Way to hit a girl when she's down, huh? To slow down, LaVern moved to the Philippines, as you do. She started off playing shows at hotels and Army bases. And then she became the entertainment manager at the Marine Staff NCO club in Subic Bay in the Philippines. I couldn't find a photo. But there's a US Naval Station brochure that says, "This is a small club which really swings. It is located behind the station dispensary." I did find a lot of photos of Marines on leave in the Philippines. Here's my favorite one. They're having fun. Another handout warns about venereal disease in the town and says, "Don't jeopardize your future liberty and the health of your shipmates by exhibiting too much zeal while on liberty." Yes, beautiful. Everyone looks happy.

So you can imagine it's a kind of a crazy place. And LaVern stayed there for over 20 years. She was running this little club on the Naval base. She sang every Friday and Saturday night, and she sang all sorts of things. She was particularly fond of Neil Diamond. Apparently, she didn't sing the blues because she was playing with Filipino musicians. And she said, "You know, they just couldn't play the blues. They didn't have the notes. If they didn't have the notes, they couldn't play it." So 20 years without blues, but she was proud to have carried on performing and not going into some menial job. She learned the language in the Philippines, Tagalog, she raised four dogs and four children. Her own daughter LaAnna White was born in 1978 — I don't know who the father was — and an adopted daughter, and a boy and girl left with her by their father, who never came back for them. Now, my dream one day if I have time to research it, is to write a TV series that will be like a combination between 'MASH' and 'Glee' set on this Naval base with LaVern as the star. So you get a different fancy number every time. I'd have to change some of the facts so there can be blues in it. But, hey.

After 20 years, people were like "Where's LaVern Baker, actually?" And they tracked her down. And in 1988, she returned to the States for the first time to perform at the Madison Square Garden for Atlantic Record's 40th anniversary. And then they invited her back to the US to star in a musical review called

“Black and Blue” on Broadway in 1990 — here is the poster. It was set in Paris between the Wars about black singers in Paris. She took over the role from Ruth Brown. And then she stayed in America, playing in Hollywood and making a couple of recordings for soundtracks. One of those Madonna films, and the ‘Shag’ and if anyone remembers ‘Shag?’ I do. She made another album. She was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1991, the second female solo artist ever after Aretha Franklin. Slappy sent a telegram. She didn't respond. I wouldn't either.

In 1992, she went to the UK, where I am from. So, that's exciting for me. There's an article in *The Independent* newspaper where Martin Kellner describes her as “...a small bespectacled lady in a funny floppy hat fumbling in her handbag for her pills. But, should doubts remain as to LaVern's rock'n'roll credentials they are dispelled by the gig. In Barney Hoskyns' book, *From a Whisper to a Scream*, LaVern Baker is bracketed with Etta James, Bessie Smith and others as an Earth Mama, whose business is 'tearing up' clubs or churches. The good news is LaVern tore with a passion at Club 051, and didn't finish tearing until 2:40 a.m. in the morning.”

She was living in New York City on 10th Avenue. She was really into TV, her cat, and kickboxing movies. In 1994, she lost both legs to diabetes, but carried on performing in a wheelchair. This is her at the Porretta Soul Festival in Italy in 1995. “I feel good,” she said. “The only thing now is that I've got to find a man that's short.” And let's have a quick drink to that! The LA Times wrote that she had “reclaimed her old role as grand interpreter of good times and wicked love.” LaVern Baker died in 1997 of cardiovascular disease, she was 67. There was a memorial service with all sorts of R&B greats. They tracked down her daughter and flew her in. She was buried initially in an unmarked plot, but a fundraiser organized a headstone later, and apparently at that memorial service there were a lot of jokes told that were actually not suitable for a place of worship.

She had a bawdy sense of humor, and to remember her I'm going to suggest you all go home later and look up the song ‘Think Twice Version X.’ Anybody know that? Okay, you're in for a surprise. ‘Think Twice Version X’ is a duet with Jackie Wilson from 1965. You should, because even by blues standards, it is one of the rudest songs ever recorded. A really disgraceful song. I love it very much. But to finish off, I'm going to show you LaVern in 1988 doing one of my favorites, which is a song written by Leiber & Stoller — pretend gospel — ‘Saved,’ and I'm going to give LaVern the last word on how to grow old ungracefully.

LAVERN BAKER ON TAPE: And now for those who used to smoke and do all those things. This is for you. (singing) I used to smoke! I used to drink! I used to smoke and drink and do the hoochie koo....

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: That was Rock and Roll Hall of Fame-r LaVern Baker with 'Saved,' a song that was later covered by Elvis Presley, Brenda Lee, and The Band. Probably a few more as well. Just throw yourself into a YouTube vortex k-hole and you'll find all the different covers. Thank you Katy for that fabulous talk.

SUSAN STONE: Yeah, so smoke and drink and dance the hoochie coochie — wait — the hoochie koo! Smoke and drink and dance the hoochie koo — that's it. LaVern Baker did all those things and more in style. So we also have video; YouTube yourself out as Florian says, but we're going to pull some clips and audio for you of LaVern singing this song and others, including the very naughty 'Think Twice Version X.' And that'll be on our website for you, so you can see her in motion. Katy's also put together a playlist, LaVern Baker Dead Lady Deluxe over on Spotify. And that link will be in our social media and also at deadladiesshow.com/podcast.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Oh, I can't wait click shuffle play on that one.

SUSAN STONE: And we also have a Patreon.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: We do, and we'd like to say thank you to some of our wonderful Patreon supporters who are helping us bring the world transcripts of the Dead Ladies Show Podcast and you too can help us over at patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast. I'd like to shout out a few of our Patreon supporters here warm hugs to George and Tawny Platis who have a fun history podcast or their own called The Dirty Bits which focuses on you can guess it, the dirty bits. And I'd also like to send very fun squeezes to Steve Morman. Thanks so much to all of you.

SUSAN STONE: And we have some live shows coming up.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Yes, we do. Our next live show here in Berlin is on September 24, at ACUD as usual. There's also one coming up in October in New York, October 2, it's going to be a very spooky, spooky edition, with Halloween coming up, and it's at KGB Bar Red Room. So if you're in the neighborhood, stop by.

SUSAN STONE: Red Room, Red Room.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: It's already spooky. We will also have to keep you posted on our newest cousin which is a Belgian Dead Ladies Show starting later this year. So check our website or social media @deadladiesshow for more details as that story develops.

SUSAN STONE: Indeed, and we hope to see you at some or all of them. I mean, just you know all the time zones all the countries at once. Or at least you know, here on the podcast. Little Lily Swing by Tri-Tachyon is our delightful theme song and you can find it on SoundCloud, which also hosts all episodes of the Dead Ladies Show Podcast. The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced and edited by me. Thanks to Florian and to Katy and to all of you out there — all of you — for joining us. I'm Susan Stone.

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Support for this episode of the Dead Ladies Show Podcast comes from the Berliner Senate.

ALL SING: Do Boo Boo. Boo Boo Dee Boo. That's the end.

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