



Rhythm & Blues

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Allee Willis, Adoption Agent

Songwriter Finds Homes For Some Of Black History's Treasured Recordings

Before co-writing the score for Broadway's "The Color Purple," Allee Willis penned memorable R&B and pop hits for Patti LaBelle ("Stir It Up"), the Pointer Sisters ("Neutron Dance") and Earth, Wind & Fire ("September," "Boogie Wonderland")—plus one of TV's most popular theme songs, "I'll Be There for You" from the comedy series "Friends."

Lately, however, Willis has been devoting time to recordings of a different kind—but with no less of an impact. Stored in the Pacifica Radio Archives in Los Angeles is an amazing cache of taped con-

versations, interviews and readings featuring noted African-Americans whose names are benchmarks in civil rights and black history.

There's just one caveat. Dating from the '50s through the mid-'90s, these tapes are rapidly decaying. Thus, a week after the Grammy Awards, Willis and PRA co-hosted an adopt-a-tape fund-raiser dubbed the Sound of Soul.

"In terms of finding a cause I can seriously go to bat for, this is a dream from heaven," Willis says. She was drawn to the cause following an interview she did at Pacifica's L.A. outlet, KPFK. "They took me

into a vault and I saw this long row of 24-track tapes with names on them like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Dandridge, W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes. It was absolutely staggering."

Some 228 tapes gathered by archivist Brian DeShazor were annotated in catalogs that guests perused at the songwriter's home, Willis Wonderland. Basic adoption (\$250) ensured the digital preservation of a chosen tape, the adopter's name on the new master and future copies plus a CD copy of his own. To the tune of \$1,000, adopters secured the above



DEBORAH COX, right, was among the guests attending the adopt-a-tape fund-raiser co-hosted by ALLEE WILLIS.

plus distribution of 10 CD copies to institutions of their choice, such as schools, colleges and public libraries.

"Pacifica in the '60s was virtually the only place where people of color like Malcolm X could speak freely," DeShazor says. "You couldn't hear them on mainstream media."

One of DeShazor's favorite recordings is a 90-minute conversation among writer/poet Hughes, author James Baldwin and play-

wright Lorraine Hansberry, the first black woman to have a play produced on Broadway ("A Raisin in the Sun"). A quick glance at the tape catalog yields other such resonating personages as boxer Muhammad Ali (from 1968), Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver (1969), singer Esther Phillips interviewed by Angela Davis (1977), civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer (1965) and composer/musician Duke Ellington (1964).

Guests including producer Narada Michael Walden, "The Color Purple" co-composer Brenda Russell and its Tony Award-winning actress LaChanze, singer Deborah Cox and comedian Lily Tomlin adopted 52 tapes, raising \$37,000. DeShazor plans to expand the list and hold another Sound of Soul fund-raiser this summer.

The value of such a collection is priceless. Producer/composer Ry Cooder recently

derived creative impetus from a tape he listened to of Coretta Scott King talking before a peace rally three weeks after her husband's assassination. It no doubt helped Cooder with his latest project: teaming with Mavis Staples on the singer's civil rights movement-inspired Anti-debut, "We'll Never Turn Back" (Billboard, Feb. 3).

And that's not counting the preservation of pivotal chapters in African-American history that remain largely untaught.

"For many kids, it's a culture that you never hear or learn about," says Willis, a Detroit native who cut her musical teeth hanging outside Motown and listening to legendary radio personality Martha Jean "the Queen" Steinberg. "That's one of the things that hit me most while writing for 'The Color Purple.' All white people know about is King. It's a travesty I'll yell about from the mountaintops." ...