



Was there anyone finah?

BY LIZ BROWN

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QUEEN: The Life and Music of Dinah Washington, by Nadine Cohodas. Pantheon, 559 pp., \$28.50.

Dinah Washington was 39 when she died from an accidental overdose of diet pills in 1963. This fact is staggering, but not simply because a brilliant singing career was tragically cut short. It is shocking because once her elegant husk has coaxed you "to teach me tonight," it is impossible to believe Dinah Washington was ever only 39 years old. Crisp, wry, knowing, hers was a voice wise -- too wise, perhaps -- in the secrets of the world, of flesh and soul, of mink and men. And whether she was reveling in Leonard Feather's "Evil Gal Blues," tilting her way through ballads like "Unforgettable" or swinging steady at the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival with "All of Me," that piercing diction was always warm, always confiding.

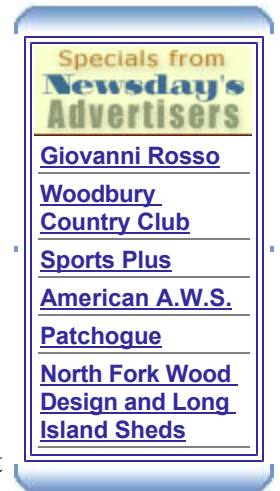
Washington stamped every song with tart, lingering phrasing. She dismissed the usual exuberant bravado of "Our Love Is Here to Stay," turning the Gershwin chestnut into a wistful, almost fatigued meditation on the passage of time. Because, really, you think, when she sings it, what if our love is here to stay? Quite a daunting concept for someone who tallied seven husbands, including a Bronx cab driver she had flown in "COD" to marry her in Sweden.

Nadine Cohodas, the author of the biography "Queen," has thoroughly documented the many details of Washington's turbulent life. A much, much abbreviated run-through: born Ruth Lee Jones in Tuscaloosa, Ala., in 1924; moved to Chicago's South Side at age 4; reared in gospel under the stern eye of her music-director mother, Alice Jones; started singing in local clubs at 17; tapped by Lionel Hampton as his band's "girl singer;" made R&B hits for Mercury for 15 years; crossed over to mainstream charts in 1959 with "What a Difference a Day Makes"; and always kept a man handy.

Washington lived by grand gestures. She answered the phone, "Queen of the Blues speaking." She had mink toilet seat covers. She injected mercury to lose weight. She "could cuss better than anybody I ever heard in my life," said Leslie Uggams. She paid for the transfer of another performer's sick mother to a better hospital and rode in the ambulance to keep the woman company. She pulled a gun on a white gas station attendant who wouldn't let her use the bathroom in Mississippi. In the clubs, they introduced her with, "Dinah, is there anyone finah?"

For all her onstage theatrics (breaking one husband band leader's saxophone, throwing ice cubes at a chattering audience member), the singer was widely revered as a first-take recording artist with an exquisite ear and impeccable timing. "Whatever she sang, she would always raise the last verse a half step," Cohodas writes. Organ player Jimmy Sigler once explained Washington's bravura styling. "It was her view that if the audiential ear is allowed to hear the same thing too long, it stops listening."

This is true for readers, too. Cohodas has done an impressive and clearly exhaustive job combing through Metronome, Down Beat, Cash Box, bank statements and calendars. We learn how Washington fared in critics' polls and year-end sales. Her first mortgage in 1948 was \$6,500. A recording session she attended on Oct. 1, 1957, broke at 4 p.m.



Anecdotal information accumulates, too, with accounts from music label executives, musicians, assistants and a man who chauffeured her for one week in upstate Geneva.

Cohodas orders all this data by dividing chapters according to year. But you can't squeeze a card-playing, high-living, pistol-packing, wig-wearing, pill-popping, trash-talking, man-loving woman into systematic 365-day segments. And ultimately, under the book's steady stream of uninflected detail, a vibrant, temperamental, impulsive, generous singer vanishes.

Occasionally, meaningful issues -- race, sex, motherhood, weight -- threaten to break through the thick gloss of minutiae. For instance, buried in the statistics is this item: Dinah's mother would not see her perform in a nightclub because she so opposed the secular life her daughter led. Yet Alice Jones lived comfortably in her daughter's house with the \$6,500 mortgage. What did this mean to Washington? Cohodas never probes, never speculates.

Perhaps it's just as well. When considering the internal conflict Washington faced as a nonstop traveling performer who missed critical moments in her two sons' lives, the author concludes tidily: "This was the trade-off, the deal that Dinah struck to have children and a career."

Documentation does not give a life substance. Nor are all facts equal. And like a singer who decides which notes are the long ones, which are the low ones, which take the vibrato, and thereby turns noise into meaningful song, a biographer, too, must modulate.

"This," Washington begins, then pauses, just barely, before continuing, "bitter earth." The gap in sound is so brief, nearly a hiccup, that you could almost miss it, except that the tiny silence tells of pain that is unspeakable, unsingable. Some notes, like some facts, are best not even uttered.

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