

Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee



Jackie Shane (1940-2019)

Jackie Shane, pioneering Black transgender musician, was born in Nashville in 1940 to Jack Crawford and Jessie Shane. As a child growing up in North Nashville, Jackie knew that she was a female trapped in a male's body. Her grandmother exposed her to music at an early age, singing beautiful melodies around the house. By four years old, Jackie relished wearing makeup and women's clothing and took posture cues from iconic actress Mae West.

Barely a teenager, Jackie joined a musical trio by happenstance after hearing young pianist Louis Lavelle playing blues in the back room of a neighborhood store. She tapped beats on chairs as Lavelle played, and he noticed her innate rhythm. They swiftly formed a band with guitarist Les Monday and got regular bookings with radio station WVOL and the Nashville Fairgrounds. At age fifteen, Jackie met Little Richard and influenced the drum stylings of Charles "Chuck" Connors from Richard's band The Upsetters. For the 1957 Excello Records hit "I Miss You So," penned by Reverend Morgan Babbs, Jackie created a simple, yet infectious beat; the song reached #8 on the R&B charts and #66 on the Pop charts.

After a summer in L.A., Jackie returned to Nashville and became a regular member of the Excello/Nashboro studio band with guitarist Johnny Jones. The New Era, Nashville's preeminent Black nightclub on Charlotte Avenue, brought Jackie on as their house band drummer. She formed a new ensemble with Lavelle and Monday, adding guitarist Bobby Hebb and bassist Deford Bailey, Jr., whose

legendary father often sat in on sessions. Between 1957 and 1960, Jackie often recorded at Excello and the New Era, once cutting a complete album with gospel singer Edna Gallmon Cooke and backing up three live performances all in one day. As Jackie's predilection for music and performance deepened, Nashville's thriving African American music scene sought after and fostered her distinctive talent.

While playing Club Cherry in Lexington, Kentucky in 1958, Jackie assembled a superior ensemble who were quickly signed by a New York agent. During a show in Florida, Jackie upstaged Jackie Wilson and was asked to leave the tour. A prime example of Jackie Shane's on-stage intensity, it signaled that she was destined to be the star of the show. After being propositioned by one of her band mates, Jackie left the group and returned to Nashville, where musicians Joe Tex and Little Willie John advised her to leave the Jim Crow South in order to succeed. As an openly gay Black performer during this era, Jackie acquiesced to this inequitable truth. After witnessing racial violence in downtown Nashville in late 1958, she decided to pursue a new direction.

A brief tenure with carnival troupe Jerry Jackson's Hep Cats further shaped Jackie's on-stage persona. In mid-1959, she relocated to Ontario, Canada with Johnny Jones and fellow band members. They played a weeklong carnival at Cornwall, hired immediately thereafter by a Montreal club. Only nineteen, Jackie had near-death encounters with the local mob and a gang who kidnapped her band mates, forcing them to return to the States without

their frontman. In spite of these traumas, Jackie opted to stick with her craft. She soon joined Frank "Duel Trumpet" Motley and his Motley Crew, playing Ray Charles and Bobby "Blue" Bland covers. That fall, the group and "Little Jackie Shane" played sold-out shows in Boston's Roxbury district alongside The Temptations, Marvin Gaye, The Drifters and Etta James.

Upon moving to Toronto in 1959-1960, Jackie was already performing in androgynous attire that became more effeminate as she rose to stardom . She spent the early 1960s gigging a regular circuit through Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Boston, Montreal and Toronto with the Motley Crew, cutting at least five tracks, including her two Little Richard-esque originals "Chickadee" and "Slave for You." Her chart-topping cover, "Any Other Way" (1962), received critical acclaim from *Billboard* and the *Chicago Defender*. The hit reached #2 on Toronto's CHUM Chart and sold over 10,000 copies locally, eclipsing Stax recording artist William Bell's original. Her follow-up 45, "In My Tenement" (Sue Records, 1963), received praise from *Billboard* and *Cashbox*, spurring appearance requests from Dick Clark's *American Bandstand* and *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Jackie declined both shows, citing discriminatory practices.

Jackie left Sue Records in spring 1963 and turned down subsequent offers from Motown and Atlantic Records. After a few years in L.A., Jackie came back to Nashville in 1965 for her only known American television performance on WLAC's R&B music program *Night Train*, where she sang a riveting version of "Walking the Dog." That summer, she toured California with Etta James and the O'Jays. Her life quieted down until August 1966, when she cut the single "Stand Up Straight and Tall"/"You Are My Sunshine" under L.A. label Modern Records. The single flopped, but a 1967

release of "Money" (1960) generated new buzz, ushering in her triumphant re-entry to Toronto's music scene. By this time, her audiences were more mainstream with roughly equal Black and White patronage, some of whom regularly traveled from as far away as Detroit and Buffalo.

"The Fabulous Jackie Shane" morphed into a bona fide star with an image of controlled flamboyance that attracted diverse audiences, including a legion of late-1960s cross-dressing fans. Using sharp wit and mid-set monologues, she chronicled her challenges within the music industry during shows. After the release of *Jackie Shane Live* (1967), she took over Frank Motley's group The Hitchhikers and cut a final, original single "New Way of Lovin' (1969)." Jackie continued touring in Toronto and L.A., but went into seclusion in December 1971, disillusioned by the industry and fed up with transgender discrimination. Ultimately, she left the music industry and returned to Nashville to care for her beloved mother Jessie, who passed away in 1997. Jackie's masterful performances, underscored by gender-bending charisma, laid the groundwork for ensuing Glam Rock trends adopted by musicians like Lou Reed, David Bowie and Michael Jackson. Jackie departed in February 2019, mere weeks after being nominated for a Best Historic Album Grammy. Celebrated for her reserved mystique and unapologetic presence, Jackie broke myriad barriers for gay and transgendered people in the music industry, and far beyond.

**This profile uses the terms "she/her" to refer to Jackie, as was done for the 2017 "Any Other Way" liner notes, a publication to which she directly contributed.*

-Caroline Eller
