

Today, I remember not only an extraordinary artist, but a dear friend whose presence shaped an important chapter of my life. It’s always a gift to know someone before the big thing happens. Before they dipped your voice onto the world to bring joy and comfort to the many souls you touched. In our early years in New York, we spent hours together pursuing musical and philosophical ideas. As far as I knew, she had come from a life in New Jersey and was in New York to do this music. So “let’s go” I thought. We had many conversations that only happen between people excited about discovery. I’d say I knew Cassandra in an important discovery period. What a gift. It was her debut recording. I remember the studio and the feeling like it was yesterday. Musicians in a room playing live. It felt like each one of those musicians represented a specific importance in her life. The big brother, the confidante, the love, the new life, the old life, the present, all aptly represented. I felt her like an older sister who knew where she was going, and what she wanted to do, but wanted you to take the trip with her. That was very nice. What I recognized about her immediately and consistently was her ability to mold a song that often had a variety of styles going on. She embraced difference and used her own alchemy to bring it into a coherent, unified expression. When I worked with her, she was by nature progressive, curious. Her curiosity allowed those of us working with her to influence her, to put another touch on her music because at the end, that warm sultry voice and deft ability to treat a song were going to make it a classic.

As her career grew and her talent intersected with the commercial industry, I was pleasantly surprised to hear of her success while I was out of the country. She stayed radiant and thoughtful. More minimal, economical, yet still expanding. That’s mastery. What the world came to know and admire was the same remarkable artist I had known from those early days—a gifted vocal musician with an undeniable presence and voice that called you to it. When I returned to the US, I carried with me a quiet hope that our musical paths would cross again. I often imagined that we would reconnect, you know, going so far out into the world and perhaps coming back together to feel that round trip.

Her untimely passing leaves a profound sense of loss, not only for those who loved her personally, but for everyone whose lives were touched by her music. I will always cherish the humble times, the idealistic memories we shared, the friendship we built, and the inspiration and caring she brought to my life. For all the music she laid down, you just know her spirit will continue to resonate for generations to come. I was privileged enough to be there around her talent before the lights hit, yet she was our light. She was our Lady Day.

—JEAN-PAUL BOURELLY (guitar)

Cassandra Wilson gave me my very first formal position as a professional pianist working with a major artist. I was about 21 years old. I remember getting on her tour bus for the first time, leaving Harlem, waking up and watching the moon skip along the trees as the bus headed along through the night. She set me free when it was needed for the music. She taught me how to listen, trusted me and was a straight shooter. She said something to me in the studio a few weeks ago, listening to the playback of “Hounds of Winter”, which we had just recorded for my upcoming album of Sting’s songs; she said happily, “My work is done!” She was referring to the fact that I had done well and shown her I had truly listened to her and learned from her. Her comment foreshadowed more than I would realize at that moment.

I don’t have too many friends. I definitely don’t have too many friends in the music entertainment business. Cassandra was one of the few and most precious. I don’t really have adequate words to express my sadness at her passing away into the universe. She was and remains: Beyond. Mythic. Beauty. A true immortal and American icon. A gem. I will miss you, Cassandra. Always and forever, your pianist...

—ELEW (piano)

As Cassandra Wilson’s music director for many years, when we did a show that felt to us as a thing we were merely conduits for, I would walk into her dressing room after the fans and well-wishers had gone, to sit down with her for a minute, when it was still vibrating in the ether. She would look at me and say, “Another book, ‘B’. Another book...” We KNEW it, and we did it, often. WE didn’t WRITE it, it was “The Author’s” book, being written through us to the extent that we could hold, carry and allow. I was reminded of a riddle/joke, which summed up so much about Cassandra for me:

Q: Where do Good girls go?
A: They go to Heaven!
Q: And where do Bad girls go?
A: ... ANYWHERE THEY WANT TO!

She kept moving and did whatever it was, HER way. And I think that’s a thing that once realized, changes EVERYTHING. It silences the gallery and anoints them who have been laid low. It isn’t necessarily a conscious choice. It’s an accepting of that which is, in the name of Love, unconditioned and self-defined. Some might call it JAZZ, or at least the lesson of it. A lesson Cassandra Marie Fowlkes Wilson learned and exemplified perfectly.

—BRANDON ROSS (guitar)

My relationship with Cassandra began early in her career, long before the world came to know the extraordinary artist she would become. We were close friends and traveled around the world together. I witnessed her growth as an artist firsthand. She had a rare voice, and she could take a melody and make it feel completely new, bringing depth, mystery and emotion to every song. As her pianist in the mid/late ‘80s to early ‘90s, I had the privilege of being part of that musical journey. Comping behind Cassandra, you could not treat her like a regular vocalist—as someone simply delivering a melody while the pianist supplied conventional accompaniment. What makes a singer brilliant is not how loud they can sing a note, but how many nuances they can evoke through their approach. Cassandra was a very nuanced singer, and I had to respond to her unique phrasing, leaving openings for her to bend time, stretch a melody or move into unexpected harmonic territory. When I think of Cassandra, I remember my friend, the young artist I knew near the beginning of her journey and the beautiful musical experiences we shared. I will always be grateful that our paths crossed. We hadn’t communicated in many years, but the music is still there and so are the memories.

—ROD WILLIAMS (piano)

Cassandra’s passing is indeed so sad and too soon. I was so lucky to have met her through Steve Coleman and even got to sing with her twice. She was a huge influence on my voice and how to embrace the audience, and she was always so sweet and encouraging to me in every interaction. I got to see her perform many times, including the first time when I was singing with Steve’s Five Elements after we opened for her at the Marciac Jazz Festival in 2003. I remember that Steve invited her to sit in during our set where he had her and me sing and improvise together on his tune “Wheel of Nature”. Then sitting backstage in the wings and watching her shine onstage and capture the audience’s hearts in her warm way was something I’ll never forget.

After her set, I remember thanking her for the short time that we sang together, and she took my hand and pulled me in close, and she almost whispered something like: “You make sure you make yourself heard and take your time, take your space.” She always urged me to not downplay my accomplishments. Her voice: a force of nature. When she performed at the 2007 Charlie Parker Jazz Festival, subbing for Abbey Lincoln, there was a delay due to tech issues, but she stayed on stage and said calmly to the audience, “Thank you for your patience. We just wanna get it right for you.” Watching her: an education. Her music and being: a blessing.

—JEN SHYU (vocals, dance, multi-instrumentalist)

Cassandra didn’t care about genres, styles of music. She borrowed from every style. This was one of the key things of M-Base, at a time when everyone wanted to “define” what jazz was and what jazz musicians were supposed to be influenced by. I heard that even before Cassandra came to New York one of her biggest influences was Joni Mitchell. Cassandra was a griot, a storyteller. In that sense she reminded us of Abbey Lincoln, who was also a griot. Cassandra was beyond style. As Duke Ellington said, “music beyond category.” She hailed from Mississippi and had a lot of stories from there. I wish I had listened to more of those stories. She loved and respected the jazz continuum and she loved Betty, Carmen, Abbey and the rest. But she was not going to limit herself. She recorded a song by The Monkees, “Last Train to Clarksville”, and she made it work in HER style. When we were concerned with intervals and cross-rhythms, she was also interested and studied and participated in our theories. But she wanted to get the soul: the “music beyond music,” as Miles put it. She achieved that and it helped her to create her own individual sound. She was a warm soul, a Southern girl through and through. She liked the things I had recorded with West African and Arab musicians. She also liked my work with electronics. She did not believe in closing doors and kept all doors open musically.

Cassandra could be a lot of fun. She liked to hang and listen to all the stories. To me, she was one of the last real bohemians in this music. Before the music got co-opted by academia, it was about being IN the bohemia, learning and sharing stories. She had a lot of that. Olu Dara, Butch Morris, Cassandra were some of the last of that breed of artist, and we would all hang and learn from them. It’s also notable to acknowledge that Cassandra did not seek stardom or popularity. It kind of fell into her lap, more or less. When it came, she embraced it. At heart, she was always that Southern girl with a curious mind.

—GRAHAM HAYNES (cornet, electronics)

In 1985, with Steve Coleman & Five Elements, I was the guitarist and she was the vocalist who was precisely singing Steve’s intricate and complex horn melodies, ready to put you in check if you couldn’t keep up. Cassandra would scat and improvise over chord changes in odd meters as well as, if not better than, most horn players. She always seemed eager to demonstrate she knew what the hell she was doing and was not going to be discounted because she was a woman. She and pianist Geri Allen set a high bar in that band. We toured together and I recorded two albums with the group before most of the original members dispersed and went their separate ways.

A decade later, I was honored when bassist Lonnie Plaxico asked me to join Cassandra’s band. Jumping into the best of her fifteen-plus years of Blue Note repertoire was more of a feast than a challenge. I discovered she remained true to the innovative approach we had experimented with earlier. Her compositions are full of polytonal inventions and polyrhythmic odd-meter excursions, while being an authentic expression of her soulful, blues-based Mississippi roots. One song I fell in love with, and I think exemplifies my point, is “You Move Me”, from the *Love Jones* soundtrack. She was able to create a 5/4 time, melodic theme using altered augmented chords, while opening and massaging the listener’s chakras, like the blues heals a broken spirit. Without using extra volume, super-high notes or pyrotechnics, she set our souls on fire—softly. She would end her live performances and bring the audience to their feet with “Harvest Moon” (Neil Young), the slowest, softest song in her book. Not many can achieve this kind of magic.

I just love Cassandra because she fought so hard to maintain that high standard of excellence and purity necessary to sustain a great and powerful quiet fire, the fire that burns in us all eternally, as gifted by the creator. Rest in Power, Warrior Queen Cassandra Wilson.

—KELVYN BELL (guitar)

Soft warm sand. Deep purrs. Grand pourings. Passionate sincerity. Grace. Intensity. Wonderful Cassandra Wilson. Truly.

—JILL SCOTT (vocals)

Cassandra was a great voice: luminous, intense, intelligent and moving. She was proud of her Mississippi artistic heritage and she made them proud. She was hard working, curious and creative. With one intentioned note she could put grits and gravy on an unfriendly table, put lace curtains up in a juke joint and stained-glass windows in a storefront church. Soul is in shorter supply as a result of her passing.

—WYNTON MARSALIS (trumpet)

Cassandra Wilson’s album, *New Moon Daughter*, was one of my all-time favorites and had a huge influence on my music, especially my first album. Rest in peace.

—NORAH JONES (vocals, piano, guitar)

It was very heartbreaking for me to hear of Cassandra Wilson’s transition. Hard to believe. I met Cassandra back in the ‘80s. Those that heard her knew that she could sing all types of music (including scatting) with her beautiful voice, playing the guitar that expressed deep feelings of understanding love with positive feelings of human experiences of life here on Earth. She had visited my home and I hers. She was not only a singer with original works, having her own sensuous style, but she was also an artist who painted lovely pictures. I was amazed. We recorded Greg Osby’s music and had fun making the record. I will never forget her and how kind she was.

Of course, her music will definitely live on as an artist who traveled the world making great music for all to hear.

—AMINA CLAUDINE MYERS (piano, organ, vocals)

She called me Ri. I called her Ra. I don’t know what to say. This was not supposed to go down this way.

I’m thinking about the hangs in her Brooklyn studio apartment. And then again in Harlem, downtown, Woodstock, Europe—damn, playing music in the key of “H” and the light and energy around being creative.

Thank you for your friendship and your musical gifts. I love you eternally. —TERRI LYNE CARRINGTON (drums)

Cassandra Wilson had a very unique instrument. There are trained voices— and then there are voices that come almost fully formed, which is the class she came in. With this special something, she navigated her way in the music.

We are fortunate to have a large body of work to represent her life in music.

—HENRY THREADGILL (alto saxophone, flute)

Some years ago, I mused that Cassandra had the ability to sing the names listed in a phone directory and make it a classic! I first met her in 1984. I was Abbey Lincoln’s pianist at the time. WBGO presented Abbey in a concert at the Peppermint Lounge in Orange, NJ. Abbey chose Cassandra Wilson, along with Bemshi Shearer, to join her as background singers. The two young vocalists were also featured together singing lyrics to Joe Henderson’s “Black Narcissus”. Cassandra’s captivating sound was already present then. In 1987, during my association with Steve Coleman and Five Elements and the M-Base Collective, she was a key figure within the development of that music. No matter how intricate the music seemed to be, Cassandra consistently imbued the music with an earthy naturalness. While she had studied icons like Abbey and Betty Carter, it is important to note Cassandra’s roots. In her birthplace of Jackson, MS, jazz was present (her father was a bassist), but she also immersed herself in the sounds of folk music through artists like Odetta. Those Southern roots remained foundational throughout her life.

—JAMES WEIDMAN (piano)

