



Living Legend: Sugar Pie DeSanto Queen of the West Coast Blues

Photo by © Joseph A. Rosen

By T. Watts

When Sugar Pie DeSanto took the stage at the San Francisco Jazz Festival on March 4, 2016, for the Women's History Month Celebration Concert Series, it definitively marked her seventh decade as a heralded performer. As the daring, diminutive and demonstrative "Queen of the West Coast Blues," it also gave her viable recognition in her hometown as one of the world's most valuable entertainers.

Umpeylia Marsema Balinton was born in Brooklyn to a Filipino-American father and an African-American mother on October 16, 1935. The family moved to the Fillmore district of San Francisco when she was a toddler, and the Fillmore was where she cut her musical teeth.

At the age of 14, Peylia, as she was called, started winning talent shows at the Ellis Theater in her neighborhood. She won so many times that management asked her to stop entering. Undeterred, she traveled to Los Angeles and, at another talent show, caught the attention of R&B impresario Johnny Otis. Otis signed her and produced her first two singles on the Federal record label in 1955, dubbing her "Little Miss Sugar Pie."

Sugar Pie married guitarist Alvin "Pee Wee" Parham a.k.a. Pee Wee Kingsley in 1957, and together they recorded sides for the Godfather of Oakland Blues, Bob Geddins. When she and Kingsley recorded "I Want To Know" on Geddins' Veltone label, it rose to #4 on the Billboard R&B chart – giving

Sugar Pie her first bona fide hit in 1960. She then went on the road with James Brown for about two years before signing with Chess Records in 1962. During her tenure with Chess, Sugar Pie became their highest paid songwriter, writing for Etta James (who happened to be her childhood friend), and a myriad of Chess artists. She also recorded a slew of duets with James, a couple of which are DJ dancefloor gems to this day.

Sugar Pie has shared stages with Howlin' Wolf, James Brown, Jackie Wilson, Rufus Thomas, Otis Redding and countless others. She set the performance bar so high for James Brown that he told her in jest she was making him work too hard. She was the only woman on the 1964 Folk American Blues tour among blues giants such as Lightnin' Hopkins, Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon and others. Jackie Wilson, Rufus Thomas and Otis Redding specifically requested Sugar Pie as opening act for her ability to stir a crowd into a frenzy.

According to James Moore, Sr., Sugar Pie's astute business manager of the past 30 years, the greatest stage show he ever witnessed was when Sugar Pie opened for Jackie Wilson at the Showcase nightclub in Oakland, CA, in the '60s: "Man, guys were standing on the tables to get a look when she hit the stage. I believe that was the most incredible show I've seen in my life. When Sugar Pie came out of the dressing room, she was already four feet off the floor. She hit the stage flying."

When Sugar Pie was honored at the 2008 Rhythm & Blues Foundation's Pioneer awards, the great Bonnie Raitt presented her the award. An added bonus was Sugar's performance at the event. She did a kick-ass version of her first hit record, "I Want To Know," including her signature back flip. In the audience was Aretha Franklin who, being moved by the spirit of Sugar Pie's performance, subsequently invited her to perform at two private parties – that's how much respect the Queen of Soul had for the Queen of the West Coast Blues.

Despite Sugar Pie's talent and regard, the Chess brothers shelved much of her output, where it remained dormant until 2009 when Kent Records of England released *Go Go Power, The Complete Chess Singles of Sugar Pie DeSanto 1961-1966*. Wondrously, the disc debuted at #15 on the Billboard Blues chart. It has garnered her legions of new fans who shout "hallelujah!" and rave about her prowess – even though it has been 43 years since Queen Sugar charted!

Sugar Pie's international stock also continues to climb. In September 2013, she traveled to Norway for The Hell Blues Festival. A Chicago Blues Band assembled by the great Willie Henderson joined Sugar Pie on the bandstand for two gigs on successive nights. On the first night, Sugar Pie received the 2013 Ambassador of Hell Blues Award. In July 2015, Sugar Pie was a headliner at the Porretta Soul Festival in Italy for the *third* time. Graziano Uliani, prognosticator of *Deep Soul* and founder of the Porretta Soul Festival, held annually in Porretta, Italy, offers this sentiment: "She continues to wow our audiences. Her live performances exceed her recent recordings despite the excellent production values of Jim Moore. Sugar Pie onstage is unrivaled. Give her a stage and she will transform it."

Though she is often classified as a blues singer while sporting the moniker "Queen of the West Coast Blues," Sugar Pie DeSanto is a multifaceted entertainer. She has written over a hundred songs for artists including Etta James, Fontella Bass, Bobby McClure, Minnie Ripperton, The Dells, The Whispers, Little Milton and Billy Stewart. Her repertoire includes standards, soul and jazz. She plays piano and does many of her own arrangements for background vocals. Her sense of comedic timing is unparalleled. And of course, her stage presence and performance convert new believers each time she graces the stage. 🎵



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Ensemble of the American Folk Blues Festival in the early 1960s – (l to r) Howlin' Wolf, Willie Dixon, Sleepy John Estes, Sonny Boy Williamson II, Sunnyland Slim, Sugar Pie DeSanto, Lightnin' Hopkins and Hubert Sumlin

The work of Broadcast Music Journalist T. Watts has appeared in *Players Magazine*, *Blues Revue Magazine*, *Blues Blast Magazine*, *Glide Magazine* and several other publications. He ghostwrote the biography, *Blood Is Thicker Than The Mud; Little Sister From The Inside Out* for Vet Stone, youngest sister of Sly Stone. He is West Coast Correspondent for www.soul-patrol.com.

Current projects include co-writing the memoirs of Chambers Brothers frontman, Lester Chambers, and producing two weekly radio shows, *Redemption Songs* and *The CyberSoulMan Review* at KPFZ 88.1 in Lakeport, CA. He has also been on the road with Sugar Pie DeSanto several times as her road manager.



Sugar Pie DeSanto is famous for interacting with her audience
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