



Lady Banks
Wilmington, North Carolina
Photo by Dan Hardison

Eva Cassidy - Songbird

In today's world of "reality TV" and televised singing competitions where people with and without talent too often appear for the celebrity factor rather than a serious pursuit of a musical career, it is refreshing to discover someone who not only has an extraordinary voice, but who is also humble and even reluctant for the spotlight.

Eva Cassidy was born in Washington, DC, into an artistic and musical family. She learned to play the guitar at an early age with her father as teacher. During and after High School, she sang in area bands always choosing to just be another member of the band. She loved music yet it was never a career pursuit, just an enjoyable hobby while performing other jobs including work at a plant nursery.

A bit shy and not comfortable being the front person, Cassidy preferred being a backup singer and singing in the recording studio behind others. She developed a reputation as a singer with a powerful voice with a natural ability for harmony and to adapt to a variety of musical styles. By 1992, she had been encouraged to make the move up front and began to perform frequently in the Washington area with a backup band.

Eva Cassidy's first commercial recording would be a duet album with Chuck Brown, a favorite DC performer who had already recorded several albums. "Her voice projected her feelings, and I could feel everything she was singing," Brown has said.

Cassidy could sing anything, folk, blues, pop, jazz, R&B, gospel - and she did. When she performed, she would move from one style to another and each her own. Record companies showed interest in her, but they wanted someone who could fit neatly into one category, they did not know what to do with a singer like her. Cassidy did release a live album and worked in the studio on an album she would never see released.

In 1996, Eva Cassidy was diagnosed with melanoma that had already spread to her bones. Although she immediately began

chemotherapy, she was given only three months to live. Cassidy would sing in public for the last time in September of 1996.

Friends in the music community had organized a tribute concert for her at a popular nightclub in Georgetown. The club was packed that night with Cassidy's friends and fans as fellow musicians took the stage to perform for her. At the end of the evening, Eva Cassidy was introduced. Frail, she appeared on stage using a walker. After being helped onto a stool and handed her guitar, Eva began the Louis Armstrong standard "What a Wonderful World." The song began weak, but grew in strength with the voice everyone had known and loved. It is said that by song's end, there was not a dry eye in the club except for Eva's.

After the concert, Eva's health began a steady decline. On November 2, Eva Cassidy died.

A compilation of her recordings was released in 1998 as the album "Songbird." In 2001, the album reached number 1 on the UK charts. It became a success throughout Europe, eventually finding success in the US as well. Since then, several albums of her music have been released as her popularity continued to spread.

Several television shows and movies have since used her music. When the producer's for the movie "Maid in Manhattan" wanted to use singer/songwriter Paul Simon's song "Kathy's Song," he suggested they use Eva's recording instead of his own.

Singer/songwriter Mary Chapin Carpenter referenced Eva in her song "My Heaven" with the line, "More memories than my heart can hold, when Eva's singing Fields of Gold." Sting, the "Fields of Gold" songwriter, is said to have been moved to tears when he heard Eva's version of his song.

Even the judges on television's "American Idol" have used Eva Cassidy as an example to contestants for her voice and song arrangements. Eva never sought fame in life, but after her death the world finally found her.

At the tribute concert in 1996, as Eva Cassidy completed the song "What a Wonderful World" she sang the final line "I think to myself, oh, what a wonderful world" and looked around at the audience. With a wave of the hand and "Thank you so much, thank you so much," she was gone.