



Houston's First Lady of Soul now boasts a new honorary title: Golden Girl.

That happens to be the name of Trudy Lynn's upcoming CD on Nola Blue Records, inspired by its self-penned title track, "Golden Girl Blues." Destined to take its place as one of the highlights in the veteran blues and soul chanteuse's sizable discography, the disc's spring release will precede celebrating her 75th birthday later that summer.

Recorded in Houston with Terry Wilson—another native of the Lone Star State who's also a member of the Nola Blue/Blue Heart stable as singer Teresa James' co-producer, chief songwriter, and rock-solid bassist with the Rhythm Tramps—at the production helm, the album will feature sparkling Lynn originals in addition to fresh material from Wilson and a Big Mama Thornton cover ("Life Goes On").

"I know when the pandemic first started and I wasn't doing nothing, I was enjoying the rest," says Trudy. "But then I started getting stir-crazy. I guess everybody did. I said, 'Well, now you know it's time to do something!' So I started writing. 'It's a perfect time to do it,' she continues. Because I wasn't about going nowhere. I can't take that chance. I'm a Golden Girl, you know!"

Born Lee Audrey Nelms in Houston's Fifth Ward, our Golden Girl comes from strong musical stock: the late Al "TNT" Braggs, one of Houston's most electrifying R&B vocalists and a prolific songwriter for Bobby "Blue" Bland, was her cousin. "My mother's maiden name is Braggs," says Trudy. "He was good. I just think he didn't get the recognition that he deserved."

Sightings of local blues luminaries were commonplace. "I remember seeing Big Walter Price walking down the street. He used to drive a big Cadillac. 'Cause my mama would say, 'That's Walter Price!'" she says. "He always wore a big old ten-gallon hat, a cowboy hat. I saw Willie Mae Thornton walking up and down Lyons Avenue."

Trudy received a concentrated early taste of R&B by soaking up the sounds emanating from Houston's legendary Club Matinee. "I wasn't even permitted to look at the Club Matinee," she says. "My mother had a place of business, a beauty shop, out there in the Fifth Ward, and it was right around the corner from that club. Plus the junior high school I went to was on the same street that that club was, and I would see it. But I was back in them days a young girl. I didn't go in. I couldn't even tell you what the Club Matinee looked like on the inside. Only on the outside I could tell you what it looked like. I would be peekin' in!"

"I remember seeing Joe Hinton, Bobby Bland of course, T-Bone Walker. People like that would be at that club," she says. "In front was a cab stand where everybody would get the cabs. And on top of it was a hotel, the Dixon Hotel, and that's where all the black artists would stay when they would come to Houston to perform, was at that hotel on top of the Club Matinee."

The radio airwaves were filled with enticing sounds. "There was a lot of music. Back in the day when I was a little girl, I heard a lot of doo-wop music, and regular music on the radio. We had a black radio station in Houston. Well, two: KCOH and KYOK. They would play the blues, and I would hear that," says Trudy, who recalls pulling in Wolfman Jack's far-off and decidedly wild broadcasts as well. "I used to love Wolfman Jack," she says. "They'd be selling chickens. You'd get a hundred chickens for a dollar. What was the funny thing about it, when you'd get the chickens, they'd send them in the mail, and when you get 'em, about three or four of 'em would be alive!"

Naturally, with so much great R&B floating around, young Lee Audrey yearned to get in on the action. "There were six of us in my family: three girls, three boys," says Lynn. "On the weekends, we had this house, and it had this big porch. And it was a screened-in porch, so all the kids would come in the neighborhood and we would have a talent show. And we would all just sing, doo-wop and the Coasters and people like that."

Her influences were many, headed by Little Esther Phillips and Etta James. "I enjoyed them, and back in the day I used to listen when my mother would be playing those 78 records like Faye Adams. I used to like Theola Kilgore," she says. "I had to listen to Dinah Washington, because all the black people listened to Dinah Washington. And Ruth Brown, of course."

At Phillis Wheatley High School, Lee Audrey took it to the next level. "I was in all the choirs and things. I was with a group in high school called the Chromatics. We did a



lot of jazz stuff,” says Trudy. “Before Archie Bell got with the group the Drells, he was going to one high school, I was at another high school. I was in that group, the Drells, but that was way back in the day, ‘64.

“He went to Kashmere High School, which was in Kashmere Gardens, an area in Houston. And Phillis Wheatley was in the Fifth Ward area. So his last year, he transferred to Wheatley. And most of us were graduating, and leaving and going on. So he got with the group, and they took off.”

No less a blues luminary than Albert Collins--the icy Master of the Telecaster--was instrumental in debuting the young singer at Walter’s Lounge. “He was the first one that set me on the stage while I was still in high school. It was on an Easter Sunday. They would have a matinee on Sundays, and my mother used to go there,” she says. “My cousin and my sister and me went. And she told them that I could sing, you know. So he said, ‘Well, you want to sing a song?’ I said, ‘Yes, sir!’ And so I did ‘A Change Is Gonna Come’ and ‘Money.’ I did those two songs.

“But the thing about that was, when I got on that stage singing with Albert Collins,” she said, “I knew that’s what I wanted to do. As I came off, I said, ‘Yeah, well, that’s it!’ I didn’t tell my mother that though!”

Lufkin, Texas, located a couple of hours north of Houston, was where Lee Audrey took her singing to the next level at a white venue, the Cinderella Club. “The year I graduated from high school in ‘65, I went to spend a summer with an aunt up there,” she says. “So my cousin, she said, ‘Well, we’re going to go out!’ And we went to this club, and they had a band. We listened to the band. They had a girl singing with them from Beaumont called Valada, and she was singing, and I told ‘em that I could sing. And they said, ‘But can you sing. . . .’ I think I knew two songs. And it was Etta James’ ‘Tell Mama,’ and I remembered from singing in the girls’ choir, the Chromatics, we did a lot of jazz so I knew ‘Stormy Weather.’ So that’s the two that I kicked off with up there.

“So something happened to the girl Valada, and she couldn’t work with them. And they asked me, would I come out and sing? I said, ‘Yeah, but I don’t know but two songs!’ They said, ‘It’s alright—we have a rehearsal. Will you learn some?’ I said, ‘Okay!’ My third song with the male vocalist was ‘Night Time Is The Right Time.’”

One problem: Lee Audrey needed a stage name pronto. “They said, ‘Well, what you gonna call yourself?’ I said, ‘Well, my name is Lee Audrey.’ And they said, ‘Well, you need a stage name.’ I said, ‘Okay,’” she recalled. “Back in the day, clubs would have a lot of stuff drawn on the walls, like cartoon characters and things. So I looked up and saw the name ‘Trudy’ on the wall up there. I said, ‘Well, just call me Trudy!’ They said, ‘Trudy what?’ I said, ‘Well, Trudy Lynn!’ You know, they had a Gloria Lynne, a Barbara Lynn. So I said, ‘Well, just call me Trudy Lynn!’”

Bitten by the show biz bug, Trudy’s plans for a career as an x-ray technician flew right out the window. “I had filled out the paper, getting ready to go. I was going to go to Prairie View. I got up there and started singing, and that just changed everything,” she says. “I kept a letter that my mother sent to me while I was up there about I need to come on home to go to college. I lost it, but I kept it for a long time. A long letter!”

Her singing fortunes accelerated when she joined the orchestra of baritone saxist Leo Baxter. “He was here in Houston. He had the big band, so I knew a lot of standard tunes from singing with the Chromatics in high school,” says Trudy. “I really don’t know how Mr. Baxter got in touch with me, but he did and asked me did I want to sing with the big band, and I said yes. It was really an honor. I didn’t realize how much of an honor it was when I did it until after I did it. But we traveled all over Texas with the big band, just performing at Army bases and doing private functions and things here in Houston.

“I worked with (trumpeter) Calvin Owens in that same area, Lufkin. Everything starts from Lufkin. We used to play Houston and go up in Lufkin, and with Calvin, we would go up there and work in a club called—it was up in an area up there, they would call it Slippery Hill,” she says. “The cars would go up in the rain, and they would be slippin’ and slidin’ up that hill.

“It was a club where they had all the black shows, the big shows, up there in Lufkin, Texas. And Calvin would go up there with a group. And I worked with him there, and there was a lot of clubs around Houston, and in and out when I was young, first starting with Calvin Owens,” says Lynn, who also worked with guitarist/bassist I.J. Gosey.





"He's the one that really introduced me, told Clarence Green about me," explains Lynn. "I was in Lufkin, and when I came back my mother told me, she said, 'Well, Clarence Green was trying to get in touch with you.' And I called him, and that was it."

Clarence was one of Houston's hottest blues guitarists (his equally prodigious brother Cal spent his formative years with Hank Ballard and the Midnighters), but he needed a replacement for his vocalist, Luvenia Lewis. "He was a good role model. He really was. He was very strict. I appreciate it, you know," says Trudy. "I used to buck him when I was young. But I haven't forgotten what he taught me. It helped me along the way. I was with him for five years."

"Back in the day in the '70s, they would have a vote on who was the best big band, the best little band. We were always the best little band in Houston. And we worked at a big club here in Houston that everybody, if anybody was anything, if you worked at the Double Bar Ranch, you was a top entertainer here in Houston," she says. "It was far out in the country. The entertainment on Saturday nights wouldn't start until 12 midnight. And it'd go from 12 until five in the morning. But it was right there in the country off of Jackrabbit Road. They was out there bootlegging and everything else. Selling fish, chicken, pickled pigs' feet, and everything going across the bar! And the man had all kinds of entertainment. He had exotic dancers, snake dancers, everything was out there at that club. And it would be packed."

John Roberts and the Hurricanes were one of the hottest soul acts in Houston during the late '60s. "They would be in uniforms," says Trudy. "They would look good. They were the band that played behind everybody that came to Houston." On lead guitar was the devastating Clarence Hollimon, nicknamed Gristle, who contributed scalding licks to some of Bobby Bland's hottest '50s Duke recordings. And stroking the bass was Ozell Roberts (no relation to John), who Trudy married in 1967 (they had three children together).

"He was one of the first bass players that really started just playing funk. All the bass players back in the day usually just walked the bass. But he had long fingers," says Trudy. "When I first got married, he would have the garage just full of a lot of these musicians that's around here in Houston, teaching them bass."

Thoroughly experienced as an R&B vocalist by 1973, it was well past time for Trudy to cut her first single. Joe Edwards, owner of tiny Sinett Records, issued her debut 45 pairing "Long Live the Blues" and the simmering soul ballad "What A Waste." "He asked me, would I record that song that he wrote, and we did it," says Lynn. "The person that produced it was the late Oscar Perry. He was a good producer. He produced a lot of people around here in Houston." "What A Waste" was notable for another reason. "It was short. Because when they mixed it, they left out a whole verse," she says. "They let it go like that. They said, 'Well, it's a B-side.'"

"That little short song got played though on everybody's program, because it wasn't in the way of nobody." Now in demand on the Texas club circuit, Lynn put together her own combo. "I had a little three-piece band. That's all you need. A bass, guitar, and drums. And if you had a piano, you were on fire, baby!" she laughs. "We went to San Antonio. We went to Austin. Just around here in Texas, you know. But it got a good little lap around here in Texas."

The next time Trudy entered a recording studio, it was in the company of producer Huey P. Meaux, the now-infamous Crazy Cajun. "He was a cool cat," says Trudy. "He was kind of hyper-like, but he was just Huey Meaux." Trumpeter Robert Smith, one of Meaux's employees, dreamed up an odd cover choice for Trudy to tackle. "When I went in the studio with him, we did a recut on the Monkees' song 'I'm A Believer,'" she says. "That song, it was good because people were really grabbing it, I guess because it was by that group. I wasn't familiar with the group. He just said, 'We're gonna try this number and do it!'"

Trudy also waxed "Love Is A Strange Thing" with the Crazy Cajun at the helm, but the producer had other priorities on a loftier commercial plane, relegating her work to the back burner. "What I think really stopped it and pushed it down was Freddy Fender," says Lynn. "He recorded all of that with Huey Meaux. And when Freddy Fender come in, he run everybody out of the studio. We all had to get out of the studio, 'cause Freddy Fender went in there and kicked it wide open."

An undaunted Lynn snagged another recording opportunity with Jerry King's Jamstone label in 1984. This time it involved one of her own songs, "Bring The Beef Home To Me," inspired by a humorous television commercial for the Wendy's hamburger chain. An adorable little old lady portrayed by Clara Peller memorably barked "Where's the beef?" upon seeing a huge bun dwarfing a tiny beef patty; Trudy cleverly transferred the concept to the blues lexicon.



"Everybody loved that commercial," says Trudy. Financed by Lynn's brother-in-law, the single never fulfilled its commercial potential due to front office machinations. "Jerry King, he couldn't figure out if he wanted to be a producer or a star himself," laments Lynn. No such problems intruded on Lynn's next label hookup with John Abbey's Ichiban Records. One of Ichiban's primary artists and producers, guitarist Gary B.B. Coleman, tracked Lynn down and convinced her to sign with the Atlanta-based label after he did a few gigs with her band.

"They told him about me," says Lynn. "He'd call me on the phone and talk to me. Every day he told me, 'I heard a lot about you! You got some tapes on you?' I said, 'Well, I've got some tapes from some of the live shows that we do. I could send you some of those.' He said, 'Well, here's what I want you to do: I want you to get a shoebox and wrap the tape up in that, and put it in there and put some newspaper around 'em, however many you got. And then write this address on it and mail it to Paris, Texas.'"

"The way I mailed it to Paris, Texas was on a Greyhound bus. You'd go down there like you were checking in your luggage. People would get packages like that on the buses. Just put 'em on the buses and they'd stop in those towns, they'd just drop the stuff and you'd go pick it up. So that's how I got those demos to him in Paris, Texas. It was funny. I'll never forget it, because I thought he was kidding at first, so I sent it. But it went through.

"Then one morning about seven in the morning, I heard somebody knocking on my door. And it was him standing at the door. And he told me who he was, and I said, 'Well, come on in! I fixed breakfast, and we talked. He come at seven in the morning and didn't leave 'til seven at night! To get with Ichiban, my kids were still in school, and I wasn't going to move with my kids. But I went on and did it because everybody was getting ready to graduate and stuff. And that's when I started with Ichiban."

Coleman produced Trudy's cover-heavy 1989 Ichiban debut album *Trudy Sings the Blues* before passing the reins to Bryan Cole and Buzz Amato for 1990's *Come to Mama. The Woman in Me* (1991), *I'll Run Your Hurt Away* (1993), and *24 Hour Woman* (Trudy co-produced the 1994 set) came close behind. Trudy developed into one of Ichiban's flagship artists, emerging as one of the country's leading blues chanteuses in the process.

"It opened the doors for me overseas. Because that's when I first went overseas was when I first got with that company," she says. "The first place I went to was in Italy. And from there, I've been all over." She was one of the headliners at the 1996 Chicago Blues Festival, dazzling the jam-packed throng.

When the Ichiban pact ended, Trudy moved back to Houston from Atlanta. After European releases for Ruf and Isabel and *Memories of You* on Jus Blues in 2002, she entered into another longstanding label relationship in 2013 with her acclaimed *Royal Oaks Blues Café* CD for Connor Ray Music, a Houston label run by harpist Steve Krase, who was introduced to Lynn by the late Jerry Lightfoot. It was quickly followed on the imprint by *Everything Comes with a Price* (2015), *I'll Sing the Blues For You* the following year, and *Blues Keep Knockin'* in 2018, all recorded at Houston's famous Red Shack Recording Studio and co-produced by Krase and Rock Romano.

Although she's mostly been sticking close to home, Trudy has managed to slip a few shows into her itinerary. "I didn't do much traveling last year. So far this year I've done a short tour in Spain, and one on the East Coast," reports Lynn, who plans to step up her touring as the pandemic hopefully eases up in months to come. Appearances in California, Portugal, Germany, and Norway have been booked before year's end.

"I'm looking forward to it because I've just been sitting here," says Trudy. Her upcoming *Nola Blue* album should help make the *Golden Girl* busier than ever next summer and well beyond.



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