



Meet Mel Collins

Mel Collins was born and raised in Hacienda Heights, CA, just outside Los Angeles. The youngest of four children, she was surrounded by music from the start. Her mother played "a little piano" and her father played the organ at their church in Los Angeles. He was also the Director of the So. Cal. State Youth Choir, a renowned gospel choir that Mel spent many nights listening to.

From an early age, she idolized Ella Fitzgerald and Nancy Wilson, and sang in her church choir. But she never considered a career as a vocalist until she attended Citrus College, where she entered as a communications major and was also taking acting courses. "I was walking down a hallway in the music department because it was a shortcut to the drama room, and a director heard me singing and humming and said 'Hey, come in here.' That's how it all started. I love to tell stories. My first love was acting, not singing. That's how I got into musical theatre, by combining my two loves."

So began Mel's career in musical theatre. She has enjoyed starring roles in numerous productions including *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Smokey Joe's Café*, and the touring company of *Purlie*. She also landed a full-time gig at Disneyland in the standing production of *Animazement*. She continues to perform regularly at Disneyland in multiple roles (singing everything from Christmas carols to jazz standards to "The Circle of Life"), an affiliation that has lasted over 15 years.

It was at Disneyland in her role as Queeny, backed by the Royal Street Bachelors, that Mel found herself singing jazz standards made famous by her childhood idols, Ella and Nancy. "What I love about Nancy is the passion she brings to what she's singing, I can always hear the story being told. And [Ella's] musicianship is by far higher than any other female vocalist. I try to take from both of those and put them together. With standards, I still get to tell a story. I always bring a little acting to whatever I'm singing. I can't separate them."

Her solo career began in 2009, when she decided to put together her own cabaret show. She hadn't previously thought of herself as a lead vocalist outside the context of a musical. "I loved being in the choir; in the background. I loved doing group scenes, I hated doing monologues. I wanted to be part of a team." But her team mentality was sometimes overshadowed by her striking physical presence. "I always thought of myself as 'fourth alto from the left,' but being six feet tall, it's hard for me to blend into the background. I realized 'why not go with it?' The second I made that decision was when everything blew up." She approached composer, arranger and trombonist Duane Benjamin, whose credentials were well established through his work for Disney among many others. Duane wrote her arrangements for the cabaret show and put together a small band to back her up. Her first show sold out, as did the next one she did six months later.

At the second show, clarinetist Vince Verdi was in the audience, scouting for a vocalist to feature in his band, *The Side Street Strutters*. By the end of the night, he knew he had found his front-woman. It was in this band that Mel's ethos as a lead vocalist crystallized. "When you're fronting a band, you have to be in control and all the focus is on you. But the way I get around that is by telling myself I'm still part of a team—the band is here and the audience is a part of it and we're all working together for a good show." Mel performs regularly with the *Side Street Strutters*, touring the country on a circuit of theatres and festivals.

Meanwhile, Mel's collaboration with Duane Benjamin has put her at the helm of an 18-piece big band, with Duane as her musical director and band leader. Their debut album, *A Little Jazz Now & Then*, was released in the fall of 2013. She also performs as the leader of smaller, more intimate groups of varying size and instrumentation, collectively referred to as "Standard Mel".

In addition to her most frequent role fronting a band, Mel's versatility and knack for story telling has afforded her opportunities to branch out into different types of work in and around Los Angeles. She has sung on soundtracks for numerous TV shows including *Hannah Montana* and *7th Heaven*, and performed as a voiceover artist for *Modern Family*, *Vampire Diaries*, *Sesame Street Live*, *Hershey's*, and *Disney on Ice*. She has also amassed an impressive resume as a backup singer behind such artists as John Tesh, Heather Headly, Burt Bacharach, and as part of the house band on *America's Got Talent*. She also performed as M.C. for an event commemorating Disneyland's 50th anniversary, leading a Q & A with featured guest Julie Andrews.

Regardless of what role she steps into on a given day, Mel is preceded by her reputation as a masterful vocalist, generous performer and consummate professional.