



Wesla Whitfield

September 15, 1947 - February 9, 2018

Wesla Whitfield, the supremely elegant Bay Area jazz and cabaret singer who devoted her abundant musical life to the Great American Songbook, died Friday at her home in St. Helena. The cause of death was an infection brought on by bladder cancer. She was 70. Her death was confirmed by her husband and musical partner, pianist Mike Greensill, who said she died peacefully at 8 p.m.

Whitfield lavished her silken voice, interpretive nuances, emotional depth and benign wit on George Gershwin and Johnny Mercer, Harry Warren and Hoagy Carmichael, Cole Porter and Jerome Kern and scores more names both familiar and largely forgotten — until she sang them and made their works feel like standards, too. Paired with her husband, Whitfield left her gracefully incisive mark on cabarets from New York's Algonquin Room to San Francisco's Plush Room, where she had a 25-year run. She performed at Carnegie Hall and Davies Hall and at the White House, in 1996, for then-first lady Hillary Clinton. Her discography runs to 22 albums.

She did it all, since 1977, from a wheelchair. Paralyzed from the waist down when she was shot in the spine by one of two young boys who confronted her on Sanchez Street, Whitfield stopped singing for a while and worked as a computer programmer. But music was her destiny. Soon enough she was back onstage and headed for stardom.

Within a few phrases, Whitfield could spin a mood that was at once dreamily romantic and cannily self-knowing. Love was rapturous and ravishing, she made her listeners know and feel, but it could just as easily make a fool of you. She turned songs into fully fleshed narratives, a novel-like complexity cushioned in a few minutes of melody.

"Wesla always brought a certain magic to her performances" singer Michael Feinstein said in an email. "She would weave a spell with her singular sound, deep connection to the lyrics, exquisite phrasing and wry, ironic humor. It seemed to me that music was a refuge she shared with us, as I know her life was not easy, but that made the sharing of the gift all the more special." Whitfield performed on various occasions at Feinstein's eponymous San Francisco nightclub, Feinstein's at the Nikko.

"She taught you how to tell the story," said jazz singer Paula West, a friend and admirer. "She never got into melismas or any of that. She just sang the song. Her interpretation were beautiful and her finishing notes incredible." West said she hesitates to sing "The

Blues are Brewin’.” “I always felt like I would be copying Wesla.”

Speaking by phone on Jan. 29, Whitfield said that her life as a singer “brought me so much joy for such a long time. I always loved doing something well that brought people pleasure. That was a gift.”

Onstage and off, Whitfield was curious, openhearted, slyly ironic and always ready to be amused. There aren’t many singers of her stripe who would have made “Lydia the Tattooed Lady,” famously sung by Groucho Marx in “At the Circus,” a recurring part of her repertoire. Her wistful smile was backlit with drollery.

Asked about Whitfield’s salient qualities as an artist, Greensill, her husband of 32 years, said, “Wit and honesty. When she performed she seemed to have an inner light that really affected people. I can’t tell you how many have written to say how they’d been touched by her singing.”

Critics over the years had trouble controlling their superlatives, Whitfield “combines ruthless insight, intense emotion and highly evolved jazz phrasing into a musical evening that goes beyond mere entertainment to flirt with profundity,” wrote Stephen Holden in the New York Times in 2005. “There simply isn’t a more captivating artist in the field than Whitfield,” said the Chicago Sun Times’ Lloyd Sach in 1997, citing her “reverielike intensity and pop-style immediacy.”

Former Chronicle critic Gerald Nachman, whose early reviews helped propel her career, called Whitfield “the best pop singer west of Ella Fitzgerald” in a 1981 review. “It isn’t just Whitfield’s wondrous voice, with its chilling little swirls and swoops, but a savvy, sensitive mind at work behind the music.”

James Gavin, author of the definitive biographies of Lena Horne and Peggy Lee, worked with Whitfield on a Peggy Lee program at Silo’s in Napa in 2016.

“Wesla had a warm, reedy sound and a conversational delivery like none other,” he said in a Facebook message. “She had a no-frills presentation. She delivered the songs mostly as written. She knew that with material like that — and Wesla had great taste — she didn’t need to do more.

“With Wesla there was quite a bit going on between the lines, flickers of darkness,” he continued. “Wesla had found her calling, but I cannot begin to imagine what it was like to be her, the inner turmoil she must have felt. ... I saw her moodiness on several occasions. Interestingly, in the latter phase of her career Wesla began performing in her wheelchair, and on stages where there was a little room she could now move around. This seemed to free her, and I thought it brought a hint of jubilation into her always thoughtful and wise singing.”

Born Weslia Edwards on Sept. 15, 1947, in Santa Maria (Santa Barbara County), she was the youngest of three sisters. Her father was an oil field welder, her mother a bookkeeper and homemaker. Weslia (who later excised the “i” in her first name) recalled listening to Rosemary Clooney, Perry Como and Barbara Whiting on the family radio, committing their

songs to memory. "I've always wanted to sing," she said.

After graduating from Santa Maria High School, Whitfield (her last name is from her first marriage) attended Pasadena City College before transferring to San Francisco State, where she earned her degree in music in 1971. Whitfield spent three years in the San Francisco Opera Chorus. Much as she valued the "experience of professionalism," her musical interests lay elsewhere. "I kept sneaking off to piano bars."

Whitfield, who declined to discuss two previous marriages, met Greensill in 1980, when he came to a gig of hers at the Reflections Room in the Hyatt on Union Square. Over time, said Greensill, "Wesla taught me the importance of storytelling in the lyrics, and I think I taught her to be looser and swing. That was the real marriage of our styles."

By the time of the Hyatt engagement, Whitfield was starting to make a name for herself here. But certain avenues were closed off. After hearing her sing, Tony Bennett phoned her one day at Bank of America, when she still had her day job as a computer programmer. He wanted her to come on "The Tonight Show," Whitfield said, but host Johnny Carson vetoed having a singer in a wheelchair.

In 1998, Whitfield premiered a new show, "Life Upon the Wicked Stage," that combined songs with autobiographical material and slides. "It amazes me," she said at the time, "how anyone who knows anything about my life can see me as an object of pity. I'm living this fabulous life doing exactly what I set out to do at age 3."

After being diagnosed with cancer in December and enduring other health problems for the past year or so, Whitfield said, "I'm out of cope. After 41 years (since the shooting), I've had enough." Greensill and Whitfield told their fans in a recent email that she was comfortable at home in hospice and declining any major medical interventions.

On the phone two weeks ago, Whitfield paused for a moment when asked what she had especially loved singing. Rodgers and Hart came to mind. And then "Over the Rainbow," by Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg. "I did it a little differently," she said. "It was a joy to sing." In an interpretation at once meltingly tender and probing, Whitfield took her listeners right over that rainbow with her.

Greensill said a memorial event would be planned for some time in the future. He thanked longtime fans and others who expressed their love for her after she revealed her health status.

"All your beautiful love and thoughts carried her on her way," he said. "She died content that she was loved and appreciated."

In addition to her husband, Whitfield is survived by a sister, Laurella Picket, who lives in Washington State.

Obituary Credit: <https://www.sfgate.com/music/article/Wesla-Whitfield-elegant-jazz-and-cabaret-singer-12603692.php>

A note from Martin Oaks Cemetery & Crematory:

Sorry to see the passing of Wesla Whitfield. Overcoming a handicap that would sideline most of us, she performed the Great American Songbook with restraint, class and depth. Former opera singer who brought RIP Wesla Whitfield.