



P E R F O R M E R S

BRENDA LEE

By ROBERT K. OERMANN

IT IS ONE OF THE MOST AMAZING SAGAS IN THE ANNALS of popular music. Raised in dire poverty, Brenda Lee was singing on Atlanta radio at age six. She was the musical breadwinner for her family at age eight. When she was ten, she had her own record shop and radio show. She was a network-television star and a national recording artist at age eleven. At twelve, she became the youngest headliner in Las Vegas history.

Opposite: Brenda Lee, a.k.a. Little Miss Dynamite; below: Lee performing in Paris, 1960

She was the toast of Europe and a sensation in Latin America when she was fourteen.

And then she started having hits. At age fifteen, Brenda Lee became the hottest female vocalist in America. By the time she turned twenty-one, she was the top-selling female singer on Earth. Brenda Lee finished the 1960s as the third-most successful chart artist of the decade, right behind Elvis Presley and



the Beatles. Before she was thirty, she was a millionaire.

More significantly, Brenda Lee pioneered and defined the female rockabilly style. She fronted Nashville's first rock & roll band. She was the first truly global rock star, recording in seven languages and touring five continents at a time when hardly anyone else was courting an international audience. She has had more double-sided hits than any other female performer, and only Janet Jackson, Madonna, Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston have scored more consecutive Top Ten hits than Brenda Lee as female superstars.

All this from a woman who cannot remember how or why she began to make music – Brenda Lee was truly born to sing. “I would like to say that I can remember a time before music – when I was a regular kid – but I really can’t,” says Lee. “I can’t remember a time when I wanted to be a singer, because I’ve always been one.”

She was born Brenda Mae Tarpley in the charity ward of an Atlanta hospital on December 11, 1944. Family members recall that she sang along with the radio from the time she could talk, remembering tunes after hearing them just once. Her childhood favorites were Mahalia Jackson and Hank Williams. By age three, she had a fully developed style – Lee never sang in a wobbly pitched, little-kid voice; she delivered songs with an open-throated, listen-world belt.

A school talent contest led to regular radio appearances, then to local television. Country star Red Foley discovered her and brought her to national TV renown on ABC's *The Ozark Jubilee* in 1956. He also guided her to Decca Records, his label.

Lee's first session for Decca occurred in Nashville just three months after “Heartbreak Hotel” became Elvis Presley's first Number One hit. She jumped into the emerging teen style with gusto, recording a hepped-up version of Hank Williams's “Jambalaya” and her hiccuping rockabilly classic “Bigelow 6-200.” The next day she waxed “I'm Gonna Lasso Santa Claus” and “Christy Christmas,” the world's first rockabilly holiday tunes.

During the next three years, Lee bopped through one rockabilly disc after another, establishing a still revered catalogue that includes “Rock the Bop,” “Ring-a-My-Phone,” “One Teenager to Another,” “Little Jonah”



and “Dynamite,” from which the four-foot-nine-inch performer acquired her billing as Little Miss Dynamite. In 1957 she recorded the pile-driving “Let's Jump the Broomstick,” which soared up the charts in England. The following year she cut the classic “Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree,” which later became a holiday standard.

Armed with the booming power of Mahalia and the heart of Hank, Brenda Lee quickly became a favorite on the then new medium of television. In addition to appearing on Foley's show, she became a regular guest on the variety programs of Perry Como, Ed Sullivan and Steve Allen.

Billed as TV's Biggest Little Star, Brenda Lee spent the spring of 1957 on the road with Patsy Cline and George Jones. But by year's end, she was sharing stages with Bill Haley and the Comets, the Chantels, Danny and

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the Juniors and her other teen-music peers. At the Minnesota State Fair, she and Ricky Nelson shattered records by drawing 103,130 to the grandstand. In 1958 she formed her own road show with the Casuals, Nashville's first rock & roll band. The package also included, at various times, Buddy Knox, Dorsey Burnette and Carl Perkins.

After learning that Lee's discs were receiving airplay in France, producer Owen Bradley recorded her singing "The Stroll" for that market, and manager Dub Allbritten took the fourteen-year-old to Paris. Because she sounded so adult but looked so child-like, he planted a story in the press there that she was a thirty-two-year-old midget. When the truth came out, the French hailed her as Baby Rock. A sweep through Latin America ensued, resulting in mobbed theaters and her Brazilian billing as the Explosive Girl.

Her U.S. breakthrough occurred in 1959 with the sexy cha-cha "Sweet Nothin's." In addition to becoming a Top Ten pop smash, the song became the first of her six big R&B hits. For the followup, Brenda Lee recorded the even more rocking "That's All You Gotta Do." On the flip side of that growling, staccato blaster was a sad little ballad titled "I'm Sorry." Both sides became hits, but it was the slowie that became her signature song.

Lee's oversize voice and dynamic stage presence soon made her a fixture on America's rock & roll scene. She joined Dick Clark's Caravan of Stars tour of 1960 alongside Duane Eddy, Fabian, Chubby Checker and others. She headlined Murray the K's Brooklyn Paramount Christmas show that year with Dion, the Drifters, the Coasters, Bo Diddley and others, breaking all house records.

Alan Freed top-billed her at his Hollywood Bowl concert of 1961 with the Shirelles, the Ventures and B.B. King. She toured that summer with Jerry Lee Lewis, and *American Bandstand* devoted an entire ninety-minute telecast to her.

In the wake of "I'm Sorry," Lee recorded a succession of anguished, torn-from-the-chest ballads. Her throbbing conviction and torrid vocal technique made huge hits of "I Want to Be Wanted," "All Alone Am I," "Losing You," "Emotions," "Break It to Me Gently," "As Usual" and the like between 1960 and '65. Lee also originated "The Crying Game" and "Always on My Mind," later revived by Boy George and Willie Nelson, respectively. Allbritten booked her into supper clubs, put her in summer-stock musicals, made her a Vegas diva and in general guided her toward "legit" showbiz.

Even so, Lee continued to revert to rock & roll. She returned to her rasping rockabilly style on 1961's "Dum Dum," went to England

to record the hit 1964 rocker "Is It True" (with future Led Zeppelin star Jimmy Page on guitar), created a second holiday firecracker with her 1964 version of "Jingle Bell Rock" and tried a Motown-ish approach with 1963's "My Whole World Is Falling Down."

Wherever she went, Brenda Lee could spot talent. At the Star Club in Hamburg, her opening act was the Beatles, whom she tried to get signed to Decca. Five of her singles were written by a then unknown Jackie DeShannon, and Lee also recorded early songs of Kris Kristofferson, Kim Carnes and Jerry Reed. After one British tour, she came home with Elton John's first LP, touting him to whoever would listen; he later said he penned "Crocodile Rock" in her honor.

Following her searing, Grammy-nominated performance of 1969's "Johnny One Time," Brenda Lee experimented with a Memphis soul album, a Los Angeles pop production and disco recorded in Muscle Shoals. Since 1973 she has been a country hitmaker.

But Little Miss Dynamite still cuts loose with a rocker when the fancy strikes, notably on 1974's "Rock On Baby," 1985's rampaging "Feels So Right," 1991's "Your One and Only" and of course her evergreen "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree." "I still love a good rocker," says Brenda Lee. "Always have, always will." †

Opposite, top: A young girl's fantasy: Little Miss Brenda Lee, around the time of her signing to Decca Records, waltzing with the King, ca. 1956, after Presley scored his first Number One hit, "Heartbreak Hotel"; bottom: Lee headlined numerous rock & roll packages, such as Alan Freed's 1961 Hollywood Bowl show; below: Lee today

