

They wanted Daisy
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La Divina Pastora

Siparia chorus woman turns La Divina Pastora into a household name

Destiny. That's the only explanation for just how a shy chorus singer became the most iconic name in parang music.

At the ripe age of 47 years a backup singer by the name of Daisy Voisin was inadvertently thrust into the spotlight, when the lead singer for her Siparia cultural group failed to appear at the 1971 Best Village competition, at the Queen's Park Savannah in Port of Spain.

"It got started by accident," Mervyn Alleyne, a founding member of the iconic singer's La Divina Pastora band told the Kitcharee with a chuckle on Friday afternoon.

"We had planned a parang to do in the competition. Somehow the person doing the lead vocals was having problems coming out to rehearsals. Daisy was a part of the choir. She was not a lead singer. She was a chorus person.

"Our musical director Andy Worrell was musing over a replacement and Daisy said: Mr Worrell I will try.

"His response was 'Daisy, you could sing parang?'"

It seems insane that anyone would question the vocal credentials of parang music's most iconic voice. But back then no one, not even Daisy, knew her full potential.

"She said she will try," Alleyne continued.

"That was Daisy Voisin birth as a legend. That whole night practice was all about Daisy Voisin. None of us realised this woman has such a sweet tonal voice."

The mammoth Best Village crowd at the Savannah concurred. Daisy's debut made her an instant superstar in the genre...and a year later when La Divina Pastora officially formed in 1972 after Big B (Leroy Birch) took Daisy on his usual house-to-house parang route. Within a year they became the most booked parang band on the island.

A spiritual woman

Daisy took her spirituality seriously. The "Alegria" singer stuck blessed flowers into her hair and carried another set in her hand on stage. When the band was looking for a name the suggestion

arose of naming the band after the patron saint of the Siparia RC Church, Daisy insisted they seek official permission from then parish priest Fr De La Hunte.

“She went to Fr De La Hunte and asked his permission to use the name of La Divina Pastora and he gave her permission. The name suited us because La Divina was known for bringing people of all walks of life together and that’s what we wanted to do with our music,” Alleyne said.

With Daisy at the helm La Divina would go on to win seven National Parang Association of T&T (NPATT) titles. Alleyne said Daisy’s humility during those golden years was an inspiration.

“As far as I know Daisy was a very humble person. She would have had a relatively good relationship with all the people she came in contact with. While you were in competition for the NPATT trophy it was a real Trinidadian thing that we were all in this together. They would have spoken to one another,” Alleyne recalled.

The titles didn’t matter to her legacy at that point, Alleyne said. He insisted Daisy’s status as an icon of the genre was established from day one, such was the high level of her talent.

“Well boy, I felt it was like that from the beginning. From even before the formation of the group, the impression she had on Trinidad when she sang on that Best Village stage it was phenomenal. Anywhere yuh pass people was talking about her.

“From very early in the game she started in this iconic status, but she never let that get to her head. She always loved her band. She always had a feeling that while she was looked upon as this heroine and this icon, she always felt that the band contributed to where she was, the music that accompanied her was super with Big B and very good mandolin men, even now we have best in Lloyd ‘Sugar Fingers’ Gilbert,” he said.

Beating the best of the best

Alleyne said Daisy’s greatest achievement came on December 17, 1985. By this time the petite singer was at the height of her prowess and was greeted with great enthusiasm everywhere she went.

“There were bands from Santo Domingo and Venezuela here to challenge local bands. With Daisy as the lead singer we were able to claim champion status. That was a big thing. Here nah, we beat all dem Spanish groups at Hilton Hotel. Hear nah, it was like when one of those big stars coming on stage. As you see the big star everybody hand gone up and they mad,” he recounted.

By this time Big B also established himself as a star in his own right in the calypso and extempo arena. Alleyne said the stocky entertainer developed both talents on the long bus ride to and from gigs with his beloved La Divina.

“All his extempo started within the parang group. I would have done the transporting of the band in those days and after performances to keep people up Birch would be singing a bundle of

chupidness and have us laughing. He just put it to kaiso coming down the road and that was the birth of Birch as an extempo champion,” he said.

Sadly both Daisy (1991) and Big B (2005) have since passed away. Alleyne says it’s now up to a new crop of talented performers, many of them children of past members, to carry the torch and fill those big shoes. Musical director Lawrence Salandy, lead singer Marina Marchand and Alleyne’s own daughter Melina, lead that charge.

“I believe they all, and Marina in particular, have a great part to play in the continuation of the group. When Daisy passed, we had song chorus, but no lead singer. She (Marina) is the one to take up the challenge,” he said.

Alleyne said every member of La Divina Pastora is acutely aware of the task in front of them in carrying on Daisy and Birch’s legacy.

“They are aware of the responsibility. We will always be talking about the history and experiences that we had. They would have heard their parents talking about it. Going to practise they would have been at some time engaged in the thing. “We put it in their head that we should keep parang alive. When we perform we have a mixture of music but we always have a certain percentage that is authentic parang. Daisy wouldn’t want us to do it any differently,” he concluded.

