

JAZZY LADY

An Interview with Dimetra Shivers

"Well, I said I couldn't do much about a segregated army, but I sure as hell could do something about a segregated USO in a city where I'm living and paying taxes. . ."

by George Vukelich

Dimetra Shivers was born in Brownsville, Tennessee in 1912, one of seven children. Her father was a barber, her mother a milliner who sold her homemade hats out of the house. After living in Kewanee, Illinois, which was Ku Klux Klan territory, the family moved in 1931 to "liberal" Madison, Wisconsin, "which also turned out to be Klan territory." Her husband, Stan, now retired from the University of Wisconsin Photo Lab, remembers seeing a Klan parade, "with hoods and all," around the downtown square in 1925.

Three of Shivers' grandparents had been slaves, and living with her maternal grandparents influenced her profoundly. Now, a grandmother herself—her only child Michael, a Madison alderperson, and his wife, Jackie have three children—Dimetra Shivers is still considered by many to be the best blues singer in the area.



Courtesy Dimetra Shivers

Though it was hardly a mecca for blacks fleeing Klan harassment when she moved there in the early thirties, race relations have improved over the years and in 1978 the city of Madison presented blues singer Dimetra Shivers with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Humanitarian Award, which she is proud to display.

“ONE OF THE WORST THINGS about being black is that you learn to lie. You have one face that you show when you're out in the white world. You have another face, another voice when you're in the black world, when you're with your family.

“I've always told the truth no matter what world I was in and that's gotten me

George Vukelich is an outdoorsman, columnist, free-lance writer and radio show host in Madison, Wisconsin. An anthology of excerpts from his popular column "North Country Notebook" is in publication.

in trouble a lot.

"My very first day of school, I got into a big fight because the kids called me 'nigger.' My dad took me aside and told me, 'You can't lick the whole school. You can't lick the whole world, but I'll tell you this: no one likes to be called a son-of-a-bitch. So, you be prepared to run, but when they call you "nigger," you call them "son-of-a-bitch" and then you run.' And that's what I did.

"We were called 'darkies,' 'niggers,' 'monkeys,' and all the people who called us those things went to church. They were Christian. . . . My mother gave us Bibles, but I just wouldn't read the Bible. I just couldn't believe, although I did sing in the First Baptist Church for fifteen years.

I always loved to sing and I loved Bessie Smith and I wanted to sing the blues for people. My mother didn't want me going anywhere near nightclubs and places like that. My mother said they were brothels.

"So, we formed 'The Taliaferro Trio,' my sister Mercedes and my brother Odell and me. We sang stuff like 'My Wild Irish Rose' and 'Old Bill Logan's Goat':

*Old Bill Logan's goat was feelin' fine
Ate three red sheets from off the line.*

"I really started singing around town at the old 770 Club in the Memorial Union at the University of Wisconsin. It was sort of a nightclub variety club on the campus.

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An Interview with Dimetra Shivers

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"The student newspaper, *The Daily Cardinal*, reviewed my first show—here, you can read it in this clipping: 'a bit of perfect swinging by a dusky lady—such personality, rhythm and song are a rare combination. Did "Blue Prelude" ever go over when she sang it!'

"As a matter of fact, in November of 1983, Stan and I went down to a jazz festival in Chicago—Wild Bill Davison was there—and we met a man named A. Robert Vaughn who is writing a book about little-known people in jazz.

"We got to talking about his book and he said that the first black person to sing with a white band, as far as he knew, was Billie Holiday singing with Artie Shaw in 1937.

"I told him I sang with a white band at the University of Wisconsin in December of 1933. He said 'I want to interview you.'

"They say jazz is supposed to bring blacks and whites together, but I'll tell you something. Stan and I still go to a lot of jazz concerts and we went down to a three-day jazz festival in Decatur, Illinois in January of 1984. We were sitting at a table with five people, who happened to be white, and we got talking and Jesse Jackson's name came up and one of the white men said: 'They should put all the blacks on ships and send them back to Africa.'

"This man was from some little town near Gary, Indiana and he said: 'We don't let them in town. They can't even stop for a pack of cigarettes.'

"I would like to say that for most of my 73 years, I have had a few honest and sincere, loving and kind *white friends* that I trust. They still call me 'friend' in spite of the fact that I am like I am.

"This color business is the worst thing in the world. I was raised up to believe that if you were good, you went to heaven and if you were bad, you went to hell. . . I think hell is right here on earth.

"**I**N SCHOOL, FROM THE FIRST Grade on, we learned the European structure in music. We sang classical music and semi-classical music and we learned all about Bach and Beethoven and you name it. To me, that was dull, dead music. It went along *one-two-three-four* and it was

Swinging and swaying with a popular dance band from a bygone era, Dimetra Shivers belts out the blues in her inimitable style. She discovered recently that she may have been the first black singer to have performed with a white band when she sang with a University of Wisconsin ensemble in 1933.



Courtesy Dimetra Shivers

dull! *That* was during the week.

"On Sundays, I would go to the black church, either the Methodist or the Baptist in my hometown of Kewanee, and I would hear this beautiful Gospel music and it had some *feeling* to it. It rocked and it rolled and it just swayed me. It *moved* me. You *felt something*.

"Now, I didn't believe in their religious beliefs in those churches, but that music!

"I must tell you that Stan and I were watching TV the other night and they had Africans singing in their church in South Africa and praying to God for deliverance from *apartheid* and I said to Stanley: *My God, these people in this century are still looking to God to save them. . . .*

"We listened to those Africans singing, and it was beautiful music. It had just that little different timing than anything out of Europe or America. It could only have come out of Africa. It's that timing, that rhythm that is in American jazz, which is the only true American music, except of course, for the chants of the Native Americans who were here before any of the rest of us.

"My mother taught us from the cradle that we were of the 'black race,' even though my grandparents were as much white as they were black. As a matter of fact, on my father's side, my great-great grandfather was a white man who owned, bought and sold slaves. On my mother's side, my great-great grandfather also was a white man who owned, bought and sold slaves. So, along with the Indian blood in me, along with the African, there's quite a mixture. I guess I can't help being like I am.

"All through school, when I had to write down my race—and I was the only non-white kid all through high school—I always wrote down 'red, white and black.' The red came from the Cherokee.

"My mother said: 'Don't write down *Negro* on the paper, we are *black people*. So I wrote 'black' and some black kids

beat me up because I used 'black.' I think this was first or second grade. They took offense at that word. They wanted to be called 'Negro.'

"Since then, I've never stopped using the word 'colored.' That's what I am and that's what the NAACP is—the National Association for the Advancement of *Colored* People. I even prefer the spelling c-o-l-o-u-r-e-d. That's what the NAACP used originally, but they changed it. I like the word.

"You know, NAACP really got started up in Madison during World War II. There had been a chapter here, but it died down and then in 1942, there were a lot of black soldiers stationed out at Truax Field here. . . . There was a USO in town, a United Service Organization where the soldiers could come in to relax and dance and meet townspeople, and the black soldiers were told they weren't welcome there. So, some people in town, black people, wanted to set up another USO, a segregated USO where they would be welcome.

"Well, I said I couldn't do much about a segregated army, but I sure as hell could do something about a segregated USO in a city where I'm living and paying taxes. *This is my home now!* So, my sister Mercedes and Lucille Miller and two or three other people and me got together and had a first meeting. Then on December 10, 1942—here's the clipping from the paper: '*. . . some 55 to 65 Negro members of the community came together to consider how the Negro in Madison can best fulfill his rights as a citizen in a democracy.*'

"We wanted to organize and fight and Lucille's mother, Mrs. Anna Miller, said there used to be an NAACP Chapter in town once, and why didn't we start it up again? We could really fight if we had a good organization. So that's what we did. The new organization is still here, and we are too—still fighting. ■