

This Day in History... August 29, 1924

Birth of Dinah Washington

Singer Dinah Washington was born Ruth Lee Jones on August 29, 1924, in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Known as the “Queen of Blues”, she was one of the best-known and most popular female rhythm & blues singers during the 1950’s.

Washington’s family moved to Chicago when she was young and she joined the church choir, playing piano for them when she was still in elementary school. By the time she was a teenager she was directing the choir and joined the Sallie Martin Gospel Singers. Washington dropped out of school to sing full time and helped found the Gospel Singers Convention.

When she was 15, Washington won a talent contest and began singing in clubs. She impressed the owner of the Garrick Stage Bar and was hired to sing upstairs while Billie Holiday sang downstairs. It was here that Lionel Hampton heard Washington sing and invited her to perform with his band. Her first recording soon followed – “Evil Gal Blues.” That record and the next one, “Salty Papa Blues,” appeared on the *Billboard* Harlem Hit Parade in 1944.



Dinah Washington booklet stamp

In addition to R&B, Washington sang blues, jazz, standards, pop, and country songs. From jazz and blues to R&B and pop, Washington’s high, gritty vocals just seemed to find a place in all kinds of music.

Washington scored her first top ten pop hit with the Dorsey Brothers’ “What a Difference a Day Makes.” She followed that with “Unforgettable” and “This Bitter Earth.” In 1960, she teamed up with Brook Benton to form one of the best duos of the era. Their single “Baby (You Got What It Takes)” was a smash hit in both the US and Europe, making Washington an international star as well. They also recorded “A Rockin’ Good Way (To Mess Around and Fall in Love).”

Washington performed at the Cavalcade of Jazz concert twice, as well as Jazz festivals in Newport, Rhode Island, New York City, and Washington, DC. She also performed with Count Basie and Duke Ellington in 1963.

While resting at home between tours, Washington died suddenly of a heart seizure on December 14, 1963, at just 39 years old. During her career, she won one Grammy Award and later had three songs admitted to the Grammy Hall of Fame. Her song “TV is the Thing (This Year)” was considered a song that shaped Rock and Roll, and she was inducted into that Hall of Fame in 1993.



From the 1993 Legends of American Music issue

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