

BIO: DONNA DE LORY

The late afternoon sun is fading to a rosy glow in the California desert as Donna De Lory steps into the artists' tent at ShaktiFest. She seems to carry the sunlight with her. Resplendent in a saffron chiffon skirt with flamenco flounces, Donna shares a laugh with her backup singer, Mary Arden Collins, and has a quiet word with the soundman. She is about to debut songs from her new album, *The Unchanging*, playing them for the first time ever for the ShaktiFest audience. If she's nervous, it certainly doesn't show. But then, for a singer of Donna De Lory's immense talent, professionalism and commitment, every performance is a celebration—a transcendent musical experience for artist and audience alike.

“I started singing professionally as a kid,” she says. “I’ve been singing so long that I can float on that technique. That allows me to open myself up and really be there with the people, sharing this wonderful experience, just constantly having this communication with the audience. It’s amazing.”

It is indeed amazing when De Lory takes the stage. Her performances bring all the majesty of pop spectacle to the devotional arena. They're one big shakti soul celebration, with captivating stage lighting and a tight, groove-centric band beaming bhakti love vibes out to a crowd with arms aloft and mile wide smiles. The experience is epic, yet deeply rooted in the heart of devotion. Fully in her element, Donna commands the stage with loving grace. Behind her harmonium one moment, she's at the lip of the proscenium the next—arms outstretched to embrace the whole crowd, whirling, dancing ecstatically. The whole

thing is a massive, musical group hug, taking the audience higher and higher into what they call the bhav—the sweet surrender to the totality of being, the blissful absorption in divine light.

De Lory is particularly eager to share her new songs with her ShaktiFest posse. *The Unchanging* is one of the most personal albums in her deep catalog of mantra music classics. But its pop-savvy allure will resonate with hearts all across the world. Many of the tracks are musical and lyrical reflections on the recent passing of her father, renowned session pianist and producer Al De Lory.

“I’m really honoring him with this album,” she says. “It’s about how my father’s death affected my whole spiritual path. He died in my arms. Krishna Das’s song, ‘Mere Guru Dev,’ that he sang with his daughter Janaki, was playing. It was a sublime moment. And when you go through that transition with someone who was one of the most important people in your life, it’s a deeply transformative experience.”

But there’s nothing sad or depressing about *The Unchanging*. It’s a joyously upbeat album, awash in chilled out electronic textures with world flavors, sonorous string arrangements and tender balladry.

“As a result of doing my *Remixes* album in 2010, I just got back into dancing,” Donna says. “I love trance dance, and putting hypnotic beats with mantras. But I also still love sitting on the floor with my harmonium, chanting mantras by myself. So I wanted to have a little bit of everything on this record.”

De Lory’s musical perspective is as wide as the world itself, a glistening, multifaceted reflection of her broad experiences in life and music. She’s traveled the globe for 20 years as a backup singer and dancer for Madonna, rocked international dancefloors with her own pop

album, and put all that aside to sing sacred mantras and lyrics of consciousness—all while raising a family. With fearless vision and consummate mastery, she has appropriated the grand scope and all-inclusive universality of pop music and married it with the heartfelt purity and emotional honesty of mantra music.

In keeping with her world-class artistry, De Lory enlisted a stellar cast of A-list talent to work with her on *The Unchanging* including mixmaster Kevin Killen (U2, Peter Gabriel, Kate Bush, Elvis Costello), bassist Tony Levin (Gabriel, King Crimson, John Lennon), drummer Jerry Marotta (Gabriel, Costello, Paul McCartney), guitarist Jerry Leonard (David Bowie) and drummer Dave Allen (Michelle Branch). Longtime De Lory collaborator, keyboardist, film composer and electronic music producer Mac Quayle also figured prominently in the album's making, a process which stretched well over a year. Along the way, Donna also wove in the mantra musicianship of bhakti stalwarts like tabla master Girish, bansuri flute virtuoso Manose and bassist Mark Gorman.

The Unchanging's magic manifests right from the first moody synth pulses of the opening track, "Gayatri Mantra," a trance groove transmission of an ancient and much beloved Sanskrit mantra, intertwined by some of De Lory's most luminous, inspiring lyrics in English. And when Donna's voice soars into her sublime upper register, she lifts us all into realms of pure bliss.

"I wrote the lyrics to that song the morning my father passed," she says, quoting some of the words: "'We are energy moving to the light with no separation, only one, you and I.' The song is about this place of light that we all come from and to which we all return. Coming from that place was my intention for this record."

These days De Lory lives in sunny Topanga Canyon, the longtime L.A. artists enclave not far from where she grew up, in nearby Calabasas. Her musical and spiritual paths both originate in her artistic family's legacy.

"My granddad was a musician in the Warner Brother's Studio Orchestra," she says. "He worked on films like *Casablanca* and *Gone With the Wind*. And my dad was in Phil Spector's band."

Al De Lory played keyboards on classic recordings like the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds*. He also produced and arranged the Glen Campbell hits, "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" and Wichita Lineman." On many tracks on *The Unchanging*, Donna can be heard playing the piano her father learned to play on, continuing the family tradition of musical excellence.

Donna spent some time in Nashville as a teenager, embracing vegetarianism and soaking up some Music City vibe. But by the end of her teen years, she was back in L.A., lending her glorious voice to everything from advertising jingles to albums by Carly Simon, Bette Midler, Selena and Belinda Carlisle. In 1987 she became a part of Madonna's touring ensemble, dancing and singing backup vocals on the now legendary *Who's That Girl*, *Blonde Ambition*, *Drowned World*, *Girlie Show* and *Confessions* tours, also appearing in director Alek Keshishian's Madonna Documentary *Truth or Dare*. In 1993 De Lory made her debut as a solo artist with a self-titled album on MCA/Universal Records, hitting #1 in Japan with the single "Praying for Love" and landing in the US top 10 dance chart with "Just a Dream."

She was on top of the pops. But something was missing. "I wasn't singing my truth," she says. "I said to myself, 'Here I am, I should be happy.' And in many ways I was, but I felt so empty. My soul wasn't being

fed. I thought, 'I've got to shift this.' So I wrote a prayer—"I want my life to change, I want my life to change"—on a piece of paper and put it in my dresser. And my life really did change. I got pregnant, had my daughter, started doing mantra music and now I've got this whole other community. It's incredible!"

Fostered by L.A.'s thriving spirituality/consciousness community, De Lory resumed studies in yoga and meditation that she'd begun earlier in life. In the mid '90s she immersed herself in the burgeoning world beat scene and connected with the pioneering American kirtan singer Dave Stringer at a world music concert held in an Indian furniture store, of all places. "We just naturally started harmonizing," she recalls. "We became friends and started chanting together. We used to get hired by this French disco restaurant to play over the DJ's beats. So we'd just sit there and chant with a harmonium and cello. We'd do our mantras over these beats. I started thinking, 'How can I put all this in my own music?'"

The beautiful answer to that question came in the form of De Lory's 2000 CD *Bliss*. It was the first in a string of albums that have become the soundtrack for the yoga and consciousness movement of the 21st century, including *In the Glow* (2003), *The Lover and The Beloved* (2004), *Sky is Open* (2006), *Sanctuary* (2008) and *Remixes* (2010). And while her newest, *The Unchanging*, is deeply rooted in her personal life, it is also, irresistibly, music for everyone. You don't have to be a yogi to get into the serious groovology of a track like "Amma" or Donna's conga-driven take on George Harrison's "My Sweet Lord." You don't have to follow a guru to have your heart melted by the a cappella affirmation "Kinder," or the maternal grace of "Luciana," with its stately string arrangement and Donna's tender arpeggios on her dad's piano.

“That song was inspired by my daughter Luciana,” she says, “but then I’m also singing to the Divine Mother, and it’s such an ultimate gratitude prayer for this life, asking ‘how can I serve in the best way I can?’ People all the time ask me, ‘What is your spiritual path exactly?’ ‘Who is your guru?’ But you know, my daughter is my guru. Life is my guru. Music is my guru. Music is my spiritual path. And there is the deep connection with my father. I got on the spiritual path very early on because of my connection with him.”

And on *The Unchanging*’s dreamlike title track, Donna takes us down that path. “I wrote the song about a hiking path not far from where I live,” she recounts. “And so many things happened to me on that path—I broke up with a boyfriend, got hit by a tree and pinned down. Paramedics came and thought I could be paralyzed. So this path is a metaphor for my life. And the song is a kind of prayer to remain steady amid all the drama that’s swirling around me. To find my center amid all the change—to find that unchanging aspect which is in all of us, which is the divine in all of us, and one with all things. What a lot of people call God, Spirit, Love or Consciousness; that is The Unchanging.”