



Nell Carter performing.  
Video still from YouTube.

## Carter, Nell (1948-2003)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Short and stout, with a distinctive nasal snarl of a singing voice, and a vivacious, earthy energy, Nell Carter was a dynamic performer on stage, television, film, and record. The survivor of a number of personal tragedies, Carter built a successful and versatile show business career that was cut short by her sudden death at the age of 54.

Although she was notably outspoken on many issues, Carter kept her personal life private, and it was only after her death that her longtime relationship with a woman was revealed to the public.

Carter was born Nell Ruth Hardy on September 13, 1948 in Birmingham, Alabama, one of nine children of Horace and Edna Hardy. The life of a large, low-income African American family in the Birmingham of the 1950s was not easy, and Carter became acquainted with personal trauma at a young age.

When she was a small child, her father died suddenly from stepping on a live power line, and at age 15 she was raped at gunpoint and became pregnant. She gave birth to a daughter, Tracy.

Young Nell learned to comfort herself with music, first listening to her parents' recordings of such performers as Dinah Washington, B.B. King, and Elvis Presley, then singing herself.

From the age of eleven, she performed in church choirs and youth groups, and even appeared on a local radio program called "The Y Teens."

After graduating from Birmingham's Parker High School, she continued to perform locally for a while. In the late 1960s, however, she followed the call of the stage to New York. There she changed her name to Carter, studied acting, and sang at such legendary nightclubs as the Rainbow Room, the Village Gate, and Reno Sweeney.

In 1971, she was cast in her first Broadway musical, *Soon*, which closed only two days after opening. She had small roles in *Dude* (1972), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), *Be Kind to People Week* (1975), and *Don't Bother Me I Can't Cope* (1976), before going to London to continue her acting studies.

She returned to New York in 1978 to her first big success in a revue of the music of Thomas Wright "Fats" Waller, called *Ain't Misbehavin'* (book by Murray Horwitz and Richard Maltby, Jr.). In this musical evocation of the Harlem Renaissance, Carter not only commanded the stage with her scorching renditions of numbers like "Honeysuckle Rose," "Mean to Me," and "Cash for Your Trash," but she also defined herself as an accomplished actress.

She won Theatre World, Drama Desk, Obie, and Tony Awards for her work in her first Broadway success. (In 1982, Carter also won an Emmy Award for reprising her role in *Ain't Misbehavin'* for the NBC television production of the show.)

As Stephen Holden observed, Carter's extraordinary performance in *Ain't Misbehavin'* thrust her into a "select circle of theatrical pop-soul beltors whose members reveled in high-powered vocal flamboyance. A typical performance by Ms. Carter reached into the fabric of a song and tore out its seams with feral flourishes."

Carter also performed in the 1979 film adaptation of the musical *Hair* (music by Galt MacDermot; book and lyrics by James Rado and Gerome Ragni) directed by Milos Forman. Her most memorable moment in the film comes when she sings "White Boys."

In 1975, Carter had been slated to play the role of Effie White in a musical being developed by composer Henry Krieger and lyricist Tom Eyer that eventually became Michael Bennett's *Dreamgirls* (1981) when she backed out to accept a television role on the ABC soap opera, *Ryan's Hope*. After her triumph on Broadway in *Ain't Misbehavin'*, she once again turned to the small screen, taking a role as a feisty cop on the short-lived NBC sitcom *The Misadventures of Sheriff Lobo*.

Like many fat black women performers, Carter could not avoid the stereotypical role of sassy maid, and in 1981, she took what would be her best-known role, as Nellie Ruth Harper, beloved and impudent caretaker of a white family on NBC's *Gimme a Break!*

Though the role hardly broke new ground, Carter made the most of it for the show's six-season run, using every opportunity to sing, dance, and demonstrate her acting skills. During the show's run she garnered multiple nominations for Emmy and Golden Globe Awards and achieved wide fame as a comic actress.

In 1982, Carter married lumber executive George Krynicki, and converted to Judaism. During the couple's ten-year marriage, Carter, who had been unable to have children after the birth of her daughter during her teens, adopted two infant sons, born within months of each other, Joshua (December 1989) and Daniel (February 1990).

In 1992, she divorced Krynicki and married music producer Roger Larocque, whom she divorced after only a few months.

During the mid-1990s, Carter became involved with a woman named Ann Kaser, referred to only rarely in public as Carter's "friend and business partner." Soon Kaser and Carter and Carter's two young sons were sharing a home in Beverly Hills, California.

Though she presented a powerfully upbeat persona in her professional life, Carter had recurring health and emotional problems. During the 1980s she attempted suicide and fought alcohol and cocaine addictions. She suffered from chronic diabetes and in 1992 she underwent surgery to repair brain aneurysms.

In 1989, she was devastated when one of her brothers, Dr. Bernard Taylor, whom she described as "the best friend I ever had," died of AIDS. His death was to inspire Carter to AIDS activism in the 1990s, working especially with Project Angel Food, a Los Angeles-based organization that delivered food to people living with AIDS, and with Project Inform, a community-based educational and lobbying group.

For all her difficulties, which also included bankruptcies in 1995 and 2002, Carter continued her dynamic career in the 1990s with a role on the ABC sitcom *Hangin' with Mr. Cooper* from 1992 through 1997, and frequently guest-starring on television series such as *Ally McBeal* and *Reba* and made-for-television movies.

In 1991, she starred in a Los Angeles revival of Jerry Herman's *Hello Dolly!* with an African American cast.

In the 1990s, Carter also provided voices for a number of characters in animated television and film

projects, including Bruce W. Smith's *Bebe's Kids* (1992).

She also had roles in several theatrical films, most notably Charles Matthau's film of Truman Capote's *The Grass Harp* (1995) and Ismail Merchant's *The Proprietor* (1996).

In 1997, Carter returned to Broadway to play the hard-hearted Mrs. Hannigan in the twentieth-anniversary revival of the Charles Strouse, Martin Charnin, Thomas Meehan musical *Annie*. Carter became upset when she learned that promotional material for the show featured images of a white woman in her role. The producers denied that there was any racism involved in the advertising, saying that they used the pictures of actress Marcia Lewis because they had been shot before Carter had committed to the role and they could not afford to discard them.

During her year-long stint on *Annie*, she was plagued by health problems and one night collapsed on stage from an insulin insufficiency.

In 1999, Carter joined with the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus to present a memorable concert called "Misbehavin'!" She conceived of the concert as a means of helping herself come to terms with the loss of her brother some ten years previously.

The concert consisted of music that her brother particularly enjoyed. "I wanted to sing with [the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus]," she said, "because I think they are wonderful." She added that her brother would have loved "being up there with the Chorus, either playing piano or conducting."

When she authorized the Chorus to release a cd of the concert, she declined any royalties and insisted that all proceeds go to the Chorus's Financial Assistance Network (F.A.N. Club), which offers grants or no-interest loans to chorus members who otherwise would not be able to participate in chorus activities.

In 2002, Carter was cast in a revival of the musical *Raisin* (music by Judd Woldin and Robert Brittan; book by Robert Nemiroff and Charlotte Zaltzberg), based on the Lorraine Hansberry play, *Raisin in the Sun*. Carter was to be Mama Lena, the matriarch of an African American family struggling to survive in 1950s Chicago, a role she seemed born to play.

Sadly, however, on January 23, 2003, two weeks before opening night, Nell Carter's thirteen-year-old son Joshua found her dead at their home in Beverly Hills, California, apparently from heart problems related to her ongoing diabetes.

Those who had not known that Carter was a lesbian were surprised to learn that her heir and the custodial parent of her two sons was her partner and friend, Ann Kaser.

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### **About the Author**

**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.