

For More Information, contact:
Red Hurricane Records
P.O. Box 1401
LaPorte, IN 46352

Website: www.norajeانبlues.com
Email: Mark Bruso - mjbruso@aol.com

Nora Jean Bruso Biography

Nora Jean Bruso (nee Wallace) was born to sing the blues. Like so many blues greats she hails from the Delta of Mississippi. She was born in Greenwood, a town in the heart of this blues rich region. In blues lore, Greenwood is famous for being the town in which Robert Johnson sang his last song, died, and possibly is buried. A less famous blues musician from Greenwood whose influence on Nora was much more profound was her father, Bobby Lee Wallace, a professional blues singer and sharecropper. It was from him and the other members of her family that Nora developed a deep and abiding love of the blues that would shape the course of her entire life.

Blues was an ever present force in the Wallace household. Not only was Nora's father a blues singer, her uncle, Henry "Son" Wallace was also a professional blues singer and guitar player. Several of Nora's other relatives also played musical instruments, although not professionally. Whenever the extended Wallace clan got together, a blues jam was sure to follow. Even Nora's grandmother, Mary, contributed to her blues education. She ran a juke house that featured live blues every Saturday night. As a child Nora would sneak out of bed late at night and listen to her relatives and their friends sing blues classics at her grandmother's place. Among these classics, the music of Howlin' Wolf was most prominent and became not only Nora's first musical love, but also her inspiration to begin singing. This inspiration came very young.

Nora has been singing ever since she can remember. Her first paid performance occurred when she was only six years old. One of her older brothers (she has eleven brothers and four sisters) bragged to two of his friends that his sister could really sing. To prove his point, he brought them into her room for an impromptu jam. Nora lit into some Howlin' Wolf she heard her father sing and each of the boys gave her a nickel. The song was "Howlin' for my Darlin'," and Nora recorded it on her first CD in memory of the occasion.

Blues is not Nora's only musical love. She inherited her other musical love, gospel, from her mother, Ida Lee Wallace, who was a gospel singer. The influence of gospel on Nora's music has been profound. A seminal moment in Nora's musical development came in 1969 when Nora saw Mahalia Jackson, perhaps the greatest gospel singer of all time, appear in the movie, "Imitation of Life." Since then Nora has sought to pattern her singing style after Mahalia Jackson. Many people have remarked how similar their voices are. To Nora there is no higher compliment she can be paid.

Despite its storied history, it was not in Greenwood that Nora experienced first hand the hard scrabble life that forged the music so many blues legends, but about thirty miles up highway 49, half way to Clarksdale, on the Equen plantation where Nora's family moved when she was still a girl. Here Nora worked

in the cotton fields along side her family when she was not on school. This is where her blues education took hold. The pivotal event of these years occurred when Nora won a high school talent competition by singing. Soon word about her voice spread throughout the Delta, and Nora was invited to perform at other area schools. This acclaim convinced her that she had the talent to turn her passion into a profession. Like so many blues musicians before her, however, she would have to wait until she moved north to Chicago, the blues capitol of the world, for this dream to become reality.

Nora moved to Chicago in 1976. Although not by design, once again she walked in the footsteps of so many blues greats by settling on the West Side of Chicago. Magic Sam, Buddy Guy, Otis Rush, and many other blues legends called this section of Chicago home. Nora came here to live with her Aunt Rose, who was working to promote several West Side clubs that featured blues. One day she heard Nora sing and insisted that she accompany her to one of the clubs she was promoting and sit in with the band. Little did she know that before the night was over her niece would be a professional blues singer.

It happened at a club named the Majestic. The band was Scottie and the Oasis. All it took was for Nora to sing one song and Scottie asked her to join the band. The lineup set that night stayed in tact for five years before Scottie's unfortunate passing. During this time many local musicians, most notably Mary Lane and Joe Barr, encouraged Nora and taught her the fine points of her craft. When Scottie passed, Nora was still very young, but she was what she knew she always wanted to be: a blues singer.

Nora's big break came two years later. In 1984 Jimmy Dawkins, a West Side guitar legend, saw Nora perform at a local club and invited her to join his band. He also cut her first single that year, "Untrue Lover," (Leric, 1984). This is the first song Nora wrote. Her second, "Oh My Love," became the B-side of the single. With Dawkins' encouragement, Nora became a BMI affiliated songwriter and began to develop her musical skills far beyond singing. She was already well on her way to becoming an accomplished musician.

For the next seven years Nora toured and recorded with Jimmy and his band. During this time she took center stage in the blues world. She appeared at major festivals throughout Europe and the United States, including the King Biscuit Festival in Helena, Arkansas, and the Chicago Blues Festival in her adopted home town. Following her 1989 appearance at the Chicago Blues Festival her picture appeared in color on the front page of the Chicago Tribune.

Nora also refined her skills as a recording artist during this time. She appeared on two of Jimmy Dawkins' records, "Feel the Pain," (JSP, 1985), and "Can't Shake These Blues," (Earwig, 1991), both of which are still in print. In 2002, JSP re-released "Feel the Pain" with a bonus track by Nora.

By 1991 the demands of performing were becoming too great for Nora's two sons. She left the road and the blues world to raise her boys. Although away from blues, Nora was not away from music. She sang gospel in church. She also kept her friends in the blues community, remaining especially close to her former band mates. Nora's closest friend, Billy Flynn, produced her new CD. Two other old friends, Willie Kent and Eddie Shaw, also joined Nora on her debut CD. After five years Nora felt ready to perform locally again, her love of the blues never having lost its call. She sang occasionally with Johnny Drummer at Lee's Unleaded Blues, and she formed her own band, Nora Jean and the Fellas. For two years they performed occasionally in Chicago clubs, but Nora remained ambivalent

about returning to a life in the blues fast lane. More than once she retreated from the music scene in frustration at having to begin her career again.

In 2001 a phone call from Billy Flynn brought Nora back to the blues for good. Billy asked Nora to sing lead and background vocals on four tracks for his new CD, "Blues and Love," (Easy Baby, 2002). So moving was the experience of recording again that Nora realized this was her destiny, a destiny she is determined to embrace. Come fame or obscurity, wealth or poverty, Nora was born to be a blues singer. It is her gift, her calling, her passion.

In 2002 Nora's personal and professional life changed dramatically. In February she met and, six months to the day later, married Mark Bruso, her newest and biggest fan, who also became Nora's business manager. For a third time in her life, Nora walked in the footsteps of the blues legends (or in this case, a blues legend), and once again unwittingly. Nora had always wanted to be closer to her country roots and so Nora and Mark moved to La Porte, Indiana to start a new life together. As soon as they arrived they found the town's most famous resident to be none other than Pinetop Perkins, the legendary blues piano player and member of the great Muddy Waters band. Pinetop now performs regularly with Nora in her shows at La Porte's blues club, Bucks Workingman's Pub.

To restart her career Nora turned to her past. In the spring of 2002 she called her mentor and friend Jimmy Dawkins for help. Jimmy immediately invited Nora to appear with him at the 2002 Chicago Blues Festival. Although Nora only sang two songs, the Chicago Sun Times called the songs "show-stopping," and proclaimed Nora "up-and-coming" in the blues world. Nora also received a "Keeping the Blues Alive" award from the Black History Association for her comeback to the blues. After eleven years out of the spotlight Nora was ready once again to take her place center stage in the blues world.

In October 2002 Nora entered the recording studio of her old friend Jerry Soto in the Northwest suburbs of Chicago with the same band that backed her just four months earlier at the Chicago Blues Festival. Only three changes were made to the lineup. Nora added her old friend the legendary Willie Kent on bass, Brian Lupo, a regular member of her band on guitar, and when Jimmy Dawkins had emergency arm surgery, James Wheeler, also on guitar. The resulting CD, "Nora Jean Bruso Sings the Blues," was awarded Big City Blues' prestigious and rare five star rating, and has reached number 4 on XM radio's blues charts. The CD has been called "great" in many quarters.

In a short time Nora has hit her stride. Her voice is stronger, deeper, and richer than in her youth without losing its incredible range. The magazine Blues in Britain has written: "With a voice as big as hers, Nora Jean Bruso is definitely a strong contender to inherit the title of Queen of the Blues." Once again Nora is touring the United States and has returned to Europe where a Swiss newspaper called her the "great lady of the blues." Nora has also written fourteen songs for her follow-up CD tentatively entitled, "That's What I'm talking About."

Nora knows that now is her time. It is true that life imitates art. She has lived a life full of passion and pain, triumph and despair, and with it has come a wisdom out of which is born art. Living involves pain but offers redemption as well. That is what the blues is all about.

###