

# JACKIE SHANE

# TRANSGENDER SINGER

b. May 15, 1940

d. February 21, 2019

*“I guide my life. ... No matter what anyone says, I’m going to be Jackie. That’s all I can be.”*

**She was a pioneering transgender R&B and soul singer.**

Jackie Shane was a pioneering American transgender R&B and soul singer who rose to fame in Toronto, Canada, during the 1960s.

Assigned male at birth in Nashville, Tennessee, Shane knew she was trans in early adolescence. Her single mother supported her gender expression in an era when growing up Black in the segregated South was difficult and crossdressing was illegal. Shane grew her hair and wore traditionally female clothing, jewelry, and makeup — even to school.

Musically gifted, Shane sang in the church choir and began performing professionally in the 1950s. Remarkably, in those days the Southern R&B circuit accommodated gender-nonconforming entertainers. At first, Shane played drums as a studio musician for Excello Records and in a nightclub house band. She also sang and danced in tent shows.

In 1959 Shane performed in Montreal, Canada. Upon hearing her sing, an American expat musician, Frank Motley, asked her to front his band and she agreed. Falling in love with the less overtly racist Canadians, Shane moved to Toronto where her career took off. Singing with Motley’s group, she is credited with bringing the Black R&B sound to the city. Her big break came with the release of her 1962 single, “Any Other Way,” which climbed to No. 2 on the Canadian hit parade.

Shane’s dynamic stage presence, novel appearance, and obvious talent drew packed houses and comparisons to James Brown and Little Richard, whom she revered. Fully made up and outfitted in sequined suits, Shane was perceived publicly as a man in drag. Much later, she came out as trans.

Throughout the 1960s, Shane’s career flourished. She toured North America, squelching harassment and occasional heckling with exceptional aplomb. Shane appeared on U.S. television, but declined an invitation to perform on the famous “Ed Sullivan Show,” because producers insisted she present as male.

In 1970 Shane mysteriously disappeared from the music scene, departing discreetly to care for her mother in Los Angeles before retiring in Nashville. Most people suspected the worst.

During the height of her career, Shane released several records, including six singles and a live album. Despite her undeniable contributions, her musical legacy remained largely overlooked. In 2010, while still in self-imposed professional exile, she was remembered by her friends and bandmates in the documentary “Jackie Shane: Any Other Way,” which aired on CBC radio. The program prompted her comeback. Shane released a retrospective of her music, earning scores of new fans and a Grammy nomination for Best Historical Album in 2018.

Shane died at home the following year. The New York Times published her obituary.



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