

## A Cappella News

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April 19, 2006

### AN APPRECIATION OF THE POINTER SISTERS

*Philadelphia Enquirer (PA):*



When **June Pointer of the Pointer Sisters** died last week from cancer at age 52, many news organizations mistakenly ran a picture of her older sister Ruth with their obituaries. That final indignity simply reaffirmed the lack of appreciation the singing sisters from California have dealt with throughout their long and versatile career. Nowadays, they are viewed as another oldies act, their more popular songs - "Jump (For My Love)" "I'm So Excited" - more recognizable as commercial jingles than the top-10 hits they were.

But true Pointer fans remember when the trio was a quartet; how the sisters emerged on the scene in 1973 like a "Cloudburst" - one of many jazz standards they sang at breakneck speed; how they pushed fashion forward by dressing in the vintage past; how they could funk it up better than LaBelle, scat like Ella, and croon country so authentically that folks at the Grand Ole Opry didn't even realize they were black until they actually performed their 1974 Grammy-winning hit, "Fairytale" (which, by the way, Elvis later recorded).

True fans understand that the Pointer Sisters were the single most influential girl vocal group to cross the post-Motown divide between restrained R&B and free-flowing pop. Their gospel-tinged voices - straight out of the West Oakland Church of God, where they grew up as preachers' kids - were malleable enough to defy category. Their versatility paved the way for many, from Sister Sledge to Destiny's Child.

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True fans could tell the difference between June and Ruth. It was June, not Ruth, who dropped out of high school to form Pointers-A-Pair with sister Bonnie. Anita and Ruth joined later. Their debut album, *The Pointer Sisters* - the cover featuring a photo of the quartet rocking funkily hip 1940s' garb - was a rich, jazz-inflected gumbo of complex harmonies and R&B grooves. (One of the songs from that album, "Jada," written by Anita, inspired this reporter to name her daughter after same.)

Ruth, the oldest, provided the group's gut-bucket alto harmonies. And while Anita's voice was more pop, and Bonnie - who left the group in 1977 to pursue a solo career - was more rock, June, the fun-loving, practical-joking, generous-to-a-fault baby sister, was the belter. It was June who sang lead on "Jump," and "He's So Shy," the flirty 1980 pop anthem that put the Pointers back on the charts, positioning them for the pair of Grammys they would win in 1984 for "Jump" and "Automatic."

If the Pointer Sisters' albums were refreshingly eclectic, their live performances were spectacular. They were the first pop act to perform at the esteemed San Francisco Opera House, and those who attended that 1974 concert are probably still talking about it. From their showmanship - they wore such outfits as padded-shouldered 1940s' suits to Carmen Miranda-like rumba skirts - to their mercurial vocal prowess, the Pointers set the standard for harmonies in a way that would make the Andrews Sisters, the Manhattan Transfer and Lambert, Hendricks & Ross bow down in reverence.

June, however, could not shake the drug demons that haunted her after she was raped as a teen, became pregnant, and had an abortion, her brother Fritz told the *San Francisco Chronicle* last week. She struggled with her cocaine addiction throughout the group's heyday in the '70s and resurgence in the '80s. By the 1990s, after releasing a pair of solo albums to little fanfare, June stopped touring, replaced by Ruth's daughter Issa, whose father is Dennis Edwards of the Temptations. In 2004, June was charged with felony cocaine possession.

The Pointer Sisters were on tour when June suffered a stroke in Los Angeles in February. They rushed to their sister's bedside, where they found that cancer had also been diagnosed. The passing of June Pointer silences a voice that blended perfectly with her sisters' but was distinguishable on its own - a voice that true fans would never mistake for another.

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*Many of us old-time Bay Area vocal harmony fans have always fondly remembered the early Pointer Sisters and in the early days of the Harmony Sweeps they were the one group that all local vocal harmony groups and fans looked up to.*

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