

# The Clerk's Black History Series

## Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County Linda Martell

(June 4, 1941 -)

### "First Black Woman to Appear on the Grand Ole Opry"

Linda Martell, a.k.a. Thelma Bynem, was born June 4, 1941 in Leesville, South Carolina. One of five children, she began singing at the age of five and learned to cook for her family by the age of seven. She sang with a gospel church group with three of her brothers and later formed a trio called The Anglos with one of her sisters and a cousin; they performed at local clubs in the late 1950's. She married in 1960 and the couple had three children. She changed her name at the suggestion of a local DJ who said she needed a better stage name. The DJ suggested she looked like a "Linda" - and Linda Martell and the Anglos were born. They released their first single in 1962, "A Little Tear (Was Falling From My Eyes)" on the Fire record label based in New York. Unfortunately, the single was never promoted and didn't sell. They also recorded two more singles with no real financial return for their effort.

Around 1966, Linda and her husband attended an Otis Redding concert in South Carolina. At one point during the evening, Otis, who had been paying particular attention to Linda, shocked the crowd (and her husband) by kissing Linda during the performance. Otis later asked Linda to go on the road with him, but her husband opined against it, fearing he would lose his wife to the popular singer. As fate would have it, Otis Redding died one year later in a plane crash while traveling on tour.

In 1969 during a performance at Charleston Air Force Base, the crowd encouraged (maybe demanded) that Linda sing country music songs in place of her usual R&B lineup. As she sang a couple of familiar tunes, the crowd cheered with approval sparking the attention of Manager Duke Rayner. Convinced she could be a country singing star, Duke flew Linda to Nashville where she recorded a country version of the upbeat, funky song "Color Him Father" by The WinStons.

The year 1969 was a whirlwind for Linda; she was signed by Shelby Singleton to Plantation Records and her song became a national hit, making the Top 25 charts. That same year Linda made her first appearance on the stage of the Grand Ole Opry in August 1969, receiving two standing ovations and making her the first black woman to appear on the Grand Ole Opry's stage and radio program. Two years earlier, Charlie Pride made his first appearance on the Grand Ole Opry stage, making *him* the first black male artist to do so. In 1970, Linda's debut album "Color Me Country," was released. In total, Linda appeared 11 times on the Grand Ole Opry international radio program. She appeared on the American television variety show, Hee Haw and The Bill Anderson Show the same year.

Linda decided to leave Plantation Records when Singleton began promoting another white country artist, leaving Linda without gigs or income. Because she was still under contract, he threatened to sue anyone that tried to record her music - ostracizing her and bringing her music career to a screeching halt. In 1974, she returned home to raise her three children, and sang occasionally in small, local clubs.

In the 1980's, Linda moved to Florida to sing lead in a band covering Gladys Knight's hits with her brother Lee, a keyboardist. But when her father died in 1991, she returned home to South Carolina, in part, to be closer to her children. She took a job driving a bus for the Batesburg-Leesville school district, and eventually worked in a classroom with special needs children. She currently lives in South Carolina with her daughter and periodically entertains music history enthusiasts that stop by for front porch interviews.

