

Brenda Bennett, an American singer from Rhode Island and is best known as a member of the Warner Brothers recording group **Vanity 6**, created by musical icon **Prince** in 1982. Bennett was married to Prince's lighting and set-designer / director LeRoy Bennett, and she had previously worked as Prince's "wardrobe mistress." Bennett began her singing career in 1973 as a member of Columbia Records recording group Ken Lyon and Tombstone. Columbia sent them out on their first tour opening for one of their major acts, Mott The Hoople and a brand new British act, Queen.

Tombstone's single, "Sing Song City," did well, especially on their home turf in the Northeast, and the next eighteen months became a whirlwind of excitement which besides touring with Hoople and Queen, included shows with Edgar Winter's White Trash, Maria Muldaur, Blue Oyster Cult, Aerosmith, Steppenwolf, and Little Feat. Tombstone recorded a 2nd album, but due to management shakeups at Columbia, Ken Lyon & Tombstone's contract was not renewed and they were dropped from the label. The second album remains unreleased.

Brenda spent a number years honing her skills as a vocalist and musician working with her fellow musicians in the New England Circuit as well as a stint in Fairbanks Alaska. She began to ponder her future and began working on her original music bouncing her ideas off the person who had become her long-time best friend, LeRoy Bennett.

Rising through the ranks as a lighting and stage designer, he took on his first major gig in 1980 when he accepted an offer from Prince to join his upcoming "Dirty Mind" tour. By this time, Brenda and LeRoy had become romantically involved and while LeRoy headed out on tour, Brenda began planning their wedding. As the tour approached New York City for a show at The Ritz, LeRoy asked Brenda to meet him there telling her, "You've got to come and meet Prince and hear his music. I've got a feeling he's going to be really big." Once hearing Prince, Brenda had to agree. After their marriage in 1981, LeRoy was scheduled to head back out with Prince for the "Controversy" tour and asked Brenda to join him on the road. She agreed. Brenda was approached to take on a number of jobs for the tour; one of which was wardrobe mistress for Prince and his videographer filming his shows each night as a learning tool for Prince to critique his show t

The tour ran through the 1981 holiday season and, after a nearly month-long break, began again at the end of January in 1982. Brenda had begun to feel a little restless musically and wondered when she'd get back to making her own music again. Fate stepped in and it was about to become a pivotal moment in Brenda's musical history and career. As wardrobe attendant and organizer to Prince, she was setting up his make-up station and getting his clothes ready for the first show of the new year. As she moved about the room, Prince came in, sat down at the make-up station and began to style his hair in preparation for the show. He put a cassette tape into his player on the table and Brenda began unconsciously to sing along with the music as she was working not realizing Prince had stopped what he was doing and was listening. Prince told her he didn't realize she could sing and began to explain that he was putting together a female group and thought she'd be just right for the project. Prince envisioned the group as a trio and Brenda accepted the offer.

Shortly after the "Controversy" tour wrapped in April, Brenda found herself in Chanhassen, Minnesota to begin working on the album for Prince's girl group project. By

the time she'd arrived, the other two players, Susan Moonsie and Denise Matthews, were already there, Denise had been rechristened "Vanity," and the group had been christened "Vanity 6." Vanity had been pegged as the group's principal vocalist and front woman. Prince encouraged the three women to get fully involved in the creative process and they began writing and rehearsing. Pre-production went smoothly and in swift order, the group was in the studio with Prince co-producing the group.

Brenda made major contributions to the album. Co-writing with not only Susan and Vanity but with Terry Lewis and Jesse Johnson of The Time. Recording wrapped up quickly and the women began a whirlwind of pre-release business, promotional and public relations activities. Prince's label, Warner Brothers, snapped up the master and their A&R department set up photo shoots and planned a promotional tour which would include a couple of their first live performances. For publicists, they signed with the William Morris Agency, the biggest and most powerful operation of its kind in the world. The group was poised for success before they ever set foot on a stage. Timed to the release of the album, titled *Vanity 6*, the group showcased at The Ritz in New York City where Brenda had first met and heard Prince 2 years earlier and they were a smash!

The album took off reaching #6 on *Billboard's* R&B chart and #45 on their Top 200 Albums chart and earning the group a Gold album. Warner Brothers went four deep into the album for singles, all of which performed well. "He's So Dull" did well at radio and introduced their sound to the masses. "Nasty Girl" went to #7 on the Hot Black Singles chart and all the way to #1 on the Hot Dance Club Play chart (and was a #9 smash in the United Kingdom). "Drive Me Wild" also did well at radio, but failed to chart. The last cut culled from the album was "Bite The Beat," another club favorite which also failed to chart, but is significant as it marks Brenda's first time as lead vocalist on an internationally released single.

After their promotional tour in Europe, Vanity 6 headed out on the road along with The Time as the opening acts on Prince's "1999" tour. The excursion was wildly successful and reviews along the way singled out Vanity 6 as one of the highlights. On the road, as the only one of the group's members who came into the project as a professional musician with national touring experience, Brenda became the trio's de facto leader. She managed to keep the others in tow and in line (Susan was only sixteen) and things went, for the most part, smoothly.

The tour wound down after six months and Prince gave everyone some time off while he began planning his next project: a movie. Calling everyone back after the break, Prince announced the picture would be called *Purple Rain* and that they would all be featured in the film. The entire crew from the "1999" tour, Vanity 6, The Time and Prince with his backing band plunged into pre-production.

About midway through the recording of the second Vanity 6 album and during preproduction for the film, Vanity decided to make a career change. She was scheduled to be Prince's leading lady in the movie, but over financial disputes, she decided to make a break from the Purple family. Unbeknownst to Prince, Brenda and Susan, she had set about negotiating her own contracts with the business entities with whom they were involved and had taken on a personal manager, an accountant and had hired her own publicity firm. A worldwide search went out to find a replacement for her role in the movie. And possibly in the group.

Prince received demos, photos and videos from thousands of hopefuls and, after some time, was able to narrow it down to three candidates. He asked Brenda and Susan to review their materials and offered to leave the choice in their hands. Based on a well handled dramatic reading and her appearance, which was reminiscent of Vanity's, they picked Patricia "Patty" Apollonia Kotero of Los Angeles. The group changed their name to Apollonia 6 and headed back into the studio to replace Vanity's vocals with Apollonia's and work on new material while Apollonia spent her days picking up where Vanity had left off in the film preparations.

By the time shooting for the movie resumed, Prince was done with his album, which would become the soundtrack to the film, and The Time had finished theirs, *Ice Cream Castle*, which included both of their musical contributions to the picture. Due to the delays caused by the personnel shift from Vanity to Apollonia and the increasing demands for Brenda, Susan and Apollonia to be on the movie set, work on the *Apollonia 6* album proceeded on a catch-as-catch-can basis until the movie wrapped.

Purple Rain premiered June 25, 1984 with a gala opening night celebration at Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. Apollonia 6 was featured on stage in the film performing "Sex Shooter" which would become the first single from their upcoming album and Brenda had a speaking part.

Prince's soundtrack album was released the same day and The Time's album the following week. All three releases performed spectacularly. The movie became one of the biggest box office hits of the year reaching #11 in *Variety* and grossing almost \$70,000,000.00 during its initial run. (Prince would take home an Oscar the following year when his score won the Academy Award for Best Original Song Score.) The soundtrack album went to #1 in *Billboard* on both the Top 200 Albums and R&B Albums charts, spawned four Top Ten singles and was eventually certified 13 times Platinum (13,000,000 copies). *Ice Cream Castle* became The Time's best-selling album and produced three hit singles including "Jungle Love" and "The Bird" from the picture.

As the movie and the two albums raced up the charts over the course of the summer of 1984, work resumed on the Apollonia 6 album and it was completed in July. Released on October 1, the album went to #24 on the R&B Albums and #62 on the Top 200 Albums charts and was certified Platinum. "Sex Shooter," the first single, was a major hit reaching #7 on both the Dance and R&B album charts and climbed to #85 on the Hot 100. Brenda once again made major contributions to the album. She composed "Some Kind Of Lover" and shares co-writing credits with the group on "Sex Shooter," "Blue Limousine" with Sheila E and "A Million Miles (I Love You)" with Lisa Coleman. She is the lead vocalist on three of the album's seven tracks: "Blue Limousine," "A Million Miles" and "Some Kind Of Lover."

Brenda was also involved in the recording of several other tracks during the period when the second Vanity 6 album morphed into the Apollonia 6 album. At least three of the outtakes have surfaced in various forms. The most famous is "Manic Monday" which was written by Prince and given to Apollonia 6 for their album. Prince played all the instruments, Apollonia sang the lead vocal, and Brenda sang an answer vocal. The track did not make the final cut of the album. Two years later, Prince gave the track to The Bangles. They simply removed Apollonia's vocal and replaced it with Susanna's, keeping Prince's entire backing track and Brenda's vocal. The record went to #2 in 1986. Another track was "The Glamourous Life" which also did not make the album and was

given to Sheila E who had played on the original recording. It became the title track to her first solo album which was also released in June of 1984 at the same time as the movie, the soundtrack and *Ice Cream Castle*. The song was a Top 10 smash across the board. The third song was another Prince composition, "17 Days;" originally intended for the second Vanity 6 album recorded with Brenda on Lead. Prince pulled the song from the project to put on the intended Prince produced solo album for her.

By the fall of 1984, everything that had been released since June had proven to be massive hits and it was time to hit the road. The entire crew (minus The Time who had begun to fall apart even while *Ice Cream Castle* was still on the charts) embarked on a five month tour featuring Prince with his new backing band, The Revolution, and Sheila E as the opening act. The tour proved to be a sellout and is considered one of the most successful tours in history up until that time. Apollonia 6 simultaneously began a round of promotional appearances to support their album. Their schedule sometimes allowed for them to meet up with the Prince tour and they would appear during the encores.

Once the dust cleared in the Spring of 1985, it became clear that things within the Prince organization would be changing. Prince threw himself into the production of a second movie which would become *Under The Cherry Moon*. The Time broke up and would not reunite for six years. And things were changing within Brenda's group as well. Although they did not plan to disband, the two other women made it clear that they would be pursuing other interests in the future. But before heading their separate ways, the group took on two more projects which everyone felt might keep up interest in the group and generate more album sales during their time off.

One of them was a "mini-movie" version or long-form video of the album with a story line and parts acted out to coincide with four of the songs off the album. The project was dubbed "Mr. Christian's Birthday." There was a lot of potential in this being a good tool for promotion. One of the highlights for Brenda on this project was working with Ricky Nelson who played the part of Mr. Christian. Unfortunately, Prince never liked the "Mr. Christian" project and it never got any further than the first edits. Parts of it will show up on YouTube now and then. The other project was a semi-nude photo session using live doves. The photo session produced a hit poster of the group nearly selling out overnight. Although there was never a formal breakup announcement, the trio drifted apart and away from the Prince organization. Apollonia 6 never regrouped.

Brenda decided the time was right to begin a solo project and began looking for collaborators, potential co-writers and musicians. While driving around Los Angeles, she heard a song on the radio by John Palumbo. She liked everything about it and set about trying to find out what she could about him. John was lead vocalist and principal songwriter for the Baltimore based Lifesong/RCA recording group band Crack The Sky. John had released a solo album in 1978 during a break in their first run and had just released a second in 1985 while they were again on hiatus. They hit it off on the phone and Brenda headed to Baltimore to work on songs. She was happy with the results and they continued working together for a while, but ultimately, she was looking for a regular partner and John was still committed to his band. (Crack The Sky regrouped in 1986.)

Back in L.A., LeRoy Bennett had moved over to Zenith Lighting and when Brenda returned, one of his colleagues suggested that she might be interested in working with an English musician named Dee Harris, formerly of the band Fashion. Dee's group had been successful, especially in Europe, during the "New Romantics" movement of the

post-Punk era and their 1982 album *Fabrique* had been hit. Brenda flew to England with a batch of songs and she and Harris began recording demos.

Over the next three and a half years, they wrote and recorded a number of songs and had offers both from record companies, including RCA and EMI/Capitol, as well as a publishing deal with Warner Brothers. Despite all their hard work and the many good offers (including one to co-write with Robert Plant), nothing substantial materialized. Friction between the 2 was caused by not being able to come to an agreement on how to proceed with the offers. The only bright spot was a one-off single release for Arista Records in 1987, a reworking of Fashion's 1982 hit "Love Shadow." The record was a minor hit in the U.K. and made some noise as an import 12" on the New York dance club scene. Unfortunately, despite Brenda's vocal contributions to the new version, it was released as a "De Harris" record. Brenda returned to the U.S. in the Fall of 1988.

She headed to Minnesota to visit Susan Moonsie and Prince and while she was there, the idea of a Vanity 6 reunion was kicked around. Their old friends Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis of The Time had gone on to become one of the most successful production teams of the late 1980s (Klymaxx, Cheryl Lynn, Janet Jackson) and they were behind the idea. They were interested in producing an album and had already written a song for them, "Nasty Boy." It was Brenda who turned down the project in the end as it became evident during negotiations that Vanity's drug problems, one of the unspoken reasons for the original split, had resurfaced. Jam and Lewis gave "Nasty Boy" to Janet Jackson.

In April of 1991 at the age of 39, Brenda found herself faced with impending motherhood. Dylan Thomas-John was born in January of 1992 and for the next fifteen years, music took a back seat while she raised her son. She continued writing songs in her spare time. There was a period, after her brother Brian passed away, when she could not even open her guitar case. She and Brian had written songs together over the years and she'd promised to help him with some demos he was planning to record. He passed away before they could be completed. Once Dylan reached high school, Brenda slowly returned to music. She started writing again, shook the dust off her guitar, and began taking baby steps back into the business.

In the fall of 2006, Paul DiChiara, Brenda's longtime friend dating back to the Ken Lyon & Tombstone days, passed away. Mederick Bellaire was asked to act as musical director for his memorial concert and he set about enlisting musicians from each of the bands Paul played with during his career. Brenda and Kenny agreed to headline the event representing Tombstone. The highlight of the evening, bringing the house down was Brenda's heart wrenching performance of John Prine's "Angel From Montgomery."

As a result of the success of the concert for DiChiara, an idea began to formulate of celebrating the careers of some of the elder statesmen on the Rhode Island scene while they were still around to participate and enjoy the honor. Ken Lyon was the first to be considered and preparations were made for a show. Presented at The Stadium Theatre in Woonsocket on April 14, 2007 the event was an overwhelming success. The only living members of the Columbia-era band who were available to participate were Brenda and pianist Mark Taber. Brenda was featured singing "Hold Me Closer," her original song from the *Ken Lyon & Tombstone* album, and received a standing ovation. The success of the event was widely covered in the press and social media and two things resulted. The first was that offers began to come in for future Ken Lyon & Tombstone shows and

the second was that Prince fan pages and forums on the internet began to light up with news of Brenda Bennett's return to the stage.

With her son Dylan approaching high school graduation and her confidence refreshed by her energetic stage performances with the band and the overwhelming interest shown by her fans from the Vanity/Apollonia era, Brenda decided to embark on the recording of her first solo album. She had been writing steadily and there was a backlog of material from which to choose.

For the next year and a half, Brenda began assembling the tracks that would eventually become her first solo release, *A Capella*. She enlisted the talents of her wide range of musical compatriots including her brother Bruce Mosher, Mark Taber and Adrienne West. The first credit line reads, "Produced, written and arranged by Brenda Bennett."

The release of the album was marked by Brenda's first solo concert performance, a sold out show at the Blackstone River Theatre in Cumberland, Rhode Island September 15, 2012. The backing band included associates from almost every phase of her career. The album was performed in its entirety and she also featured songs from the Tombstone era and new acoustic arrangements of songs from her Vanity and Apollonia projects. The album was well-reviewed and has proven to be a best-seller.

Shortly after the release of *A Capella*, Brenda was approached by her friend, songwriter Charlie Mason, to record the lead vocal on his song "Guiltier" which he had co-written with producers Rob Curti and Mans Ek. Released in 2013 on Ninthwave Records, the track was a return to her R&B side and it became a major dance club hit, a best seller on iTunes and Amazon, and was cited as a top track on both Spotify and Rhapsody. A follow-up, "Private Party," was released in 2014 also climbing the dance charts as a favorite with a remix by acclaimed "galactic ravers" J-Mi & Midi D.

On April 26, 2015, Brenda Bennett was inducted into the Rhode Island Music Hall of Fame. Ken Lyon performed the ceremony and paid heartfelt tribute to their time together in Tombstone and to Brenda's accomplishments during the following decades. She thrilled the sellout crowd by performing a career-spanning set of material backed by an all-star band including her brother Bruce, Mark Taber, drummer Mike LaBelle, guitarist Fred Wilkes, multi-instrumentalist Ed McGuirl and Betsy Listenfelt. She was also joined on stage for one of the Prince-era numbers by her son, Dylan Thomas-John, the reason for her fifteen year hiatus from the music business.

After a farewell concert in Rhode Island in 2016 Brenda told journalists she planned to take it easy. The possibility of a second album wasn't out of the cards but also not a priority. When Prince died in April that same year not only were his fans left shocked, but his former associates and collaborators were blindsided. While Prince was laid down to eternal rest, thoughts returned to that unrecorded solo album from the 1980s. What was once a destiny had become an afterthought and a missed opportunity. But was it? Perhaps inspired by her grief and the legacy of her mentor, Brenda Bennett dove headfirst into her current and second solo album, titled "Once Again".

Brenda embarked on a creative journey that would put certain ghosts to rest, ignite new fires, close some of the doors to the past, and open new ones for the future. While "*A Capella*" played like a casual catching-up conversation, it is on "Once Again" where Brenda Bennett reaches her full potential as an artist, singer, and musical force.

The ten tracks of "Once Again" unfold like a journey through time - touching on loss, gain, power, love, life, and death. Brenda's first album "A Capella" gave us a nice chance to catch up with her but on "Once Again" we get to see the Brenda we always knew and loved - and then so much more. This album is a masterpiece. A career best and a personal triumph. Brenda Bennett takes us there, once again.

Prince would be very proud.