

Written by Patricia Turner
Tuesday, 19 July 2016 00:00



[Karyn Layvonne White](#) was born in Los Angeles and is the youngest of a family of five children. She sang for her church choir during her formative years. Later, at sixteen she performed for the group Legacy as one of the lead singers. This experience represented her first professional gig. She was also a background vocalist on albums for artists such as O'Bryan in which she opened for Cameo. In addition, she became a featured vocalist for Jeff Lorber before she signed with the label Warner Bros. [Karyn White](#)

performed her debut on Lorber's 1986 album

Private Passion

where she appeared on the song "Facts of Love" and collaborated for the single "Back in Love" with

[Michael Jeffries](#)

. The song turned into a success on pop and

[R&B](#)

radio, which won her a deal with Lorber's then-label Warner Bros. Records in 1986.

In fact, her first recognition in the [music industry](#) , even before making it as a vocalist, was for

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co-writing the [Stephanie Mills](#) hit song “Automatic Passion” in 1985 with the late musician Robert Brookings and lyricist Tony Haynes. In the mid-[80s](#), White collaborated with great musical talents such as O'Bryan (as already mentioned), [Richard Marx](#) and Ray Parker Jr. Moreover, Karyn White worked with her friend [Pebbles](#). She also sang “Say a Prayer for Me” for Johnny Gill. Furthermore, through her career, White wrote songs for other artists.

[Don Cornelius](#), [Soul Train](#)'s founder, was instrumental in White's career. His show *Soul Train*, which started in the early seventies, ran for decades and launched most African-American artists' careers.

Soul Train

was a compulsory step for singers to get worldwide recognition. The Jackson 5, James Brown, [The Isley Brothers](#), Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye and so on performed there. White auditioned for O'Bryan Burnette and Don Cornelius, and this is how she earned her first gig as a singer. Don Cornelius helped her financially when she was starting out.

As an entertainer, [Karyn White](#) had her main success in the 80s with her mega hits «Superwoman», « The Way You Love Me» and « Secret Rendezvous ». The latter was a top 10 hit on the R&B, Hot 100 and [Dance](#) charts. It was her first big hit, and at the end of the “Secret Rendezvous” video, she winks to her fans as if to say “I love you”. White is the only star in my knowledge who did that. “Love Saw It”, a duet with [Babyface](#) from the same album became her third consecutive song to top the Billboard Hot [Black](#) Singles Chart. White was the first female [R&B](#) performer to have her first three singles top the charts in history.

Half of her debut album was penned and produced by The Deele members L.A. Reid and Babyface (who wrote one hundred top ten hits). Evan Rogers (who later discovered [Rihanna](#) with [Jay Z](#)

), Arnie Roman, Carl Stergen and Steve Harvey also contributed to this CD. The great musicians that accompanied White could play instruments and dance at the same time. They were hot! White's first solo album Karyn White was released on September 6th 1988. In 1989, White's album was nominated for two Grammys (one was in the category Pop/R&B for the

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single “The Way You Love Me”). She also achieved nominations and wins at the American Music Awards including Soul Train Music Awards.

The album *Karyn White* reached platinum status. Instantly, the single « Romantic » (of the second album, *Ritual of Love* (1991)) was ranked in first position on the charts. The second single of this CD also had success. It was certified gold in Great-Britain in the early 90s and became platinum in the U.S. This album was produced by

[Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis](#)

. “Hard to Say Goodbye” is a nice catchy song from this CD

Ritual of love

. In 1994, White released the album *Make Him Do Right* and had international success with the highly catchy song “Hungah”. She created the lyrics while taking a shower. She wanted for this song the same aura than the classic “Love to love you baby” from Donna Summer.

Make Him Do Right

also featured “Can I Stay with You” written by Babyface. In 1995, the album

Sweet & Sensual

was released. In 2006, she recorded a compilation of the greatest hits and two singles from this CD (« All I do » and « Disconnected ») were included in the compilation

Superwoman: The Best.

Again, about White’s signature song “Superwoman” (remade by Gladys Knight, Patty Labelle and Dionne Warwick), the lyrics were simple, powerful and endowed with different layers. The song is a women’s anthem that stresses the importance of not being taken for granted, and reminds men that they need to nurture their relationships. It was written by Babyface, L.A. Reid and Daryl Simmons. “Superwoman” was one of the most beautiful songs and videos of the 80s. It became an ageless-classic and is a very strong song embraced by many cultures (for instance, the singer Gary Shaw did a Mandarin cover version). White empowers women with her lyrics.

Karyn White’s stepson Branden Lewis contributed as a songwriter on White’s comeback album *Carpe Diem*

(after 18 years out of the music business) with the lovely and powerful single “Unbreakable”. In *Carpe Diem*

(released in March 2012), the media considered the song “Sista Sista” to be another female anthem. On the album, White also sings Cyndi Lauper’s hit “True Colors”. In addition, White released a book with the same title as her latest album.

Throughout her career, Karyn White was featured in prominent magazines such as [Ebony](#) and

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Essence

. She was invited to the
Arsenio Hall Show

,
Soul Train

, etc. Karyn White is an accomplished artist: she can sing, dance and write songs. She won a NAACP Image Award for Best New Artist in 1989, among other coveted prizes and nominations.



Mrs. White did not limit herself to the artistic field. After she left the music industry in the 90s to raise her daughter, Ashley Lewis, she gained success in real estate. Furthermore, she executive produced for reality shows. Karyn White was also married to the producer-musician Bobby Gonzales, known as a virtuoso guitarist from 2007 to 2009. Now, the singer has three children. Mrs. White currently lives in Atlanta to be closer to her daughter who has graduated from College. Her adult child, Ashley Lewis, has her own thing going on and is blossoming in

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the communication field more specifically, as a reporter. There is not one interview I have heard or seen from Karyn White where she does not mention her daughter who she values highly and loves for who she is. White is proud to say that her daughter is an educated woman who studied at Howard University and achieved a major in Communication. Ashley Lewis is interested in broadcasting journalism. Karyn White describes her daughter as a philanthropist.

At the height of her success in the 80s, Karyn White excelled in dancing, performing and singing. She managed to be sexy without being vulgar or tasteless. She knows the subtlety of looking attractive and classy at the same time. Her songs did and do not contain coarse language. She is an elegant woman, in other words she is a lady. White always has great outfits in her videos. For instance, in "Secret Rendezvous", different styles look great on her, whether it's a leather jacket or a nice evening outfit with a nice shawl. This showcases eclecticism in her fashion.

Recently, Karyn White toured in Africa. She broadens her horizons by giving concerts to other parts of the world, such as Japan (her number one market) where her fans have supported her for decades. Throughout her career she has performed with diverse artists such as Jeff Lorber, Michael Jeffries, [Bobby Brown](#) , [Jody Watley](#) , Cherelle, [Tevin Campbell](#) , Babyface and [Johnny Gill](#)

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As already mentioned, Karyn White has been involved in other domains, such as real estate development. She became a business woman. She sold million dollar homes in California in her real estate business. Karyn White also gets involved with a school in L.A. to help underprivileged teenagers learn about financial literacy.

Overall, Karyn White is a singer, songwriter and businesswoman who can stand with the very best. She has been part of the entertainment industry since 1985. Her label was Warner Bros from 1986 to 1999 and she created her own label in 2011. Two new singles "All I Do" and "Disconnected" were part of the "best of" compilation album, *Superwoman: The Best of Karyn White* in 2007.

White's main musical genre is R&B, soul and new jack swing. At the 1989 Grammys, Karyn White received a nomination for the song "The Way You Loved Me" in the category Best Rhythm & Blues Vocal Female Performance . She was up against other great talents: [Anita Baker](#)

,

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[Pebbles](#)

,
[Taylor Dayne](#)

and

[Vanessa Williams](#)

. The album

Karyn White

(1988) was gold in UK and platinum in the U.S. In 1989, she had her female anthem, “Superwoman”, which became an international hit. It sold over a million CDs, was certified gold and was named “Song of the year” by the Billboard R&B. Karyn White is a great songwriter. For example, she co-wrote eight songs for the album

Make Him Do Right

. Jimmy Jam, Terry Lewis and Babyface, among others, collaborated on this album.

Mrs. White is very articulate; she expresses herself really well. She is a living proof that the American dream (in other words, the American meritocracy) exists. She is a musical princess; in other words, a B.A.P (Black American Princess which is also a variant of the term J.A.P (Jewish American Princess)) who used to live in a 20, 000 square-foot mansion with her legendary former husband Terry Lewis. Karyn White has never forgotten where she came from. For instance, she always came back to *Soul Train* to perform and recognized that this show was a great springboard for her career like many other artists.

White is an international sensation, with gold and platinum CDs in Japan, the UK and in Canada. Throughout her career, she had at least six number 1 singles. Last year, she performed in different countries such as Jamaica, the Bahamas, the Netherlands and England. In 2015, she was also on a tour with Kathy Sledge, [Deniece Williams](#) and [CeCe Peniston](#) . Karyn White returned recently from a tour in Africa.

After releasing her 1994 album *Make Him Do Right*, she focused her energy on motherhood by raising Ashley, the daughter of herself and Terry Lewis. The latter is White’s former husband, and part of the legendary Grammy-winning producer duo Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis. White and Lewis married in 1992. She adopted a son Brandon. Lewis also has other children: Trey and Chloe, who lived with the couple. They divorced in 1999. During the same period, Karyn White lost her mother who was her rock. The singer found her strength in God. Throughout the years, White built her successful interior design and real estate business. Ashley Lewis graduated from Howard University and is working as a journalist in Atlanta.

[Karyn White is a humble and unassuming artist in spite of all her accomplishments. Again, she

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has not forgotten where she came from. She was very patient during the interview. She spoke candidly about her personal and professional journey].



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P.T. Growing up, who were the artists you admired the most and why? When did you know you wanted to become an entertainer?

K.W. Growing up, the most of the acts that I admired were from Motown. [Diana Ross](#) was my favorite. At seven years old, I saw her in *Lady Sings the Blues*.

P.T. That was a pretty serious movie for a child!

K.W. Yes, you are right [chuckles]. But her performance in that film fascinated me. To me, she represented the total package as an entertainer: an actress, singer, dancer, etc. She really inspired me, like [Stevie Wonder](#), Michael Jackson and Gladys Knight. In addition, I was a big fan of Stephanie Mills who was part of the musical "The Wiz".

She really was influential to me and instrumental, because later I sang her songs from this musical in talent shows and Beauty Pageants. Since the age of five I have aspired to become an entertainer. Moreover, since high school, I saw people like Wendy Rachele going forward. This gave me strength to chase after my dream.

P.T. I do not believe in individual success. Can you name us between one and three people who were instrumental in your career, and why?

K.W. The first person I would like to name is my best friend, Kim because when she was 14, she spent time in a studio writing songs, recording them and so on. She was very mature and professional for her age. This definitely inspired me to observe the amount of work and dedication required to thrive in the industry. Furthermore, her parents were behind her and

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encouraged her. Seeing her made me confident that I could do it too. Her experience helped me develop and grow as a songwriter and an artist. It felt this road was touchable to me and it represented something I could do. The next individual was Don Cornelius. I auditioned for him while he had a record label. He strongly believed in me. He was also a manager and took care of the career of an artist called O'Bryan who became his protégé. He had three albums with Capitol. I auditioned for him to be a chorist and I toured with him. I learned a lot from that experience and Don [Cornelius] was a mentor to me. We opened for Cameo's tour. It was my first professional job during my adolescence. It was awesome doing something like that when you are 17. You feel the sky is the limit. The third person I want to name is Jeff Lorber, a jazz fusion artist signed with Warner Brothers Records at the time. I collaborated with him on one of his albums. The title of the song was "Facts of Love". Again, it represented a great learning experience.

P.T. I have something to say about Don Cornelius. He was probably like a father figure to you. It is amazing that he believed so much in you that he gave you the money you needed to launch your career, without expecting something in exchange. That is very rare. Usually, it is a family member who does something like that!

K.W. You are so right! He was exactly like a father figure to me. He was really someone important in my life and career.

P.T. On YouTube, I saw recently a *Soul Train* appearance of yours where Cornelius said you were beautiful. I think you are the only artist I heard him say that about his guest in decades. Beauty does not have a shade. It comes in all colors.

K.W. [Chuckles]. I agree... Don [Cornelius] didn't really give out compliments very easily, so I felt it was an honor.

P.T. Please, share with us how you prepared yourself to break into the [music industry](#) . Did you take singing and dancing lessons, etc.? Did you participate in contests and so on? Furthermore, how did you get your first record deal and were you always interested in being a solo artist?

K.W. I started to take singing lessons and acting since my adolescence. I was about 13. When I

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was 8, I began dance courses.

P.T. I am not surprised to hear that. It shows in your videos!

K.W. My sister is a dancer. She taught me a lot. I took mainly modern jazz and tap courses. I went to an L.A. art school in the summer. It was a school for underprivileged kids like in the movie [Fame](#).

P.T. Wow! What was it called?

K.W. The name was the Ebony Showcase Theater. Unfortunately, it does not exist anymore because the government's subventions were cut. It was an incredible platform because there was so much talent. It also gave us a great foundation. We learned acting, singing, dancing, writing and modeling. It was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. It kept me out of trouble and allowed me to do what I love daily. I also did gigs with an up and coming band out of the Bay area called Mixed Company. That experience helped me developed as a performer. I was with musicians who played with great entertainers such as [Prince](#), Sheila E., Patti Labelle, [Lionel Richie](#), etc. I learned a lot in that kind of atmosphere. I was immersed with that vibe. I captured a lot and it helped me expand as an artist. I toured with [Bobby Brown](#) for two years. Being in Los Angeles, definitely helped me to meet the right artistic people.

P.T. Again, I am not surprised to hear that you took dancing courses before you made it. For instance, I recently watched anew "Secret Rendezvous", and I could not figure out how you could dance like that with high heels. It reminded me of [Paula Abdul](#), one of the best [choreographers](#) of the music industry, who did the same thing at the time. Viewers can definitely notice your energy.

K.W. Tell me about it [laughs]. I had to find a way to look cute and professional as a dancer. Now, when I watch [Beyoncé](#), my jaw drops to see her doing that with her high heels.

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[Chuckles].



P.T. Did you also participate in contests? I think I read you took part in pageants.

K.W. Yes, I was involved in many pageants. It was very competitive. It allowed me to learn and grow. So, it was a great preparation for what would be ahead for me in the entertainment industry. My biggest pageant was called “Sugar Ray Talented Teens”. Given that Sugar Ray was a fighter, they created an annual pageant named after him. I participated in it and made it to the finals. I won first runner up. I would like to add that it takes work and discipline to win pageants, so it was great training for me regarding what would be ahead in my career.

P.T. I also wanted to know if you were always interested in becoming a solo artist.

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K.W. Always! At one point, I was a member of a band called Legacy. We were managed by Jody Sims who was the drummer of Switch. I auditioned and became one of the three lead singers. However, the band ended up with a record deal, and I got kicked out of the group. They said my voice wasn't commercial enough. This was devastating for me at the time but it was a blessing in disguise.

P.T. So, you took the time to analyse what happened.

K.W. Exactly! I learned from that. I was only 16, so I had time to reflect. I decided to work harder on my songwriting and my style. I wrote a song for Stephanie Mills. She was my idol growing up. So, this represented a great experience and opportunity for me. I did this when I was 18. The money I earned from it, I used it to record a demo tape. I hired a band and we went to the studio. During that time, I met Michael Jeffries.

P.T. I interviewed him.

K.W. Really? I have to read it. We collaborated together and that is how I secured an audition for Warner Brothers, which led to a contract. I used my money wisely. I did not buy a car or anything like that at the time. I invested the money in myself.

P.T. That was really smart. Many people think it is an investment to buy a car. It is an expediency but not an investment. There is a big difference.

K.W. My advice for aspiring artists is to invest in themselves first. At that time, I also auditioned for [Shalamar](#) after Jody Watley's departure. The group was looking for a singer. I ended up as a finalist but did not get the gig. It was for the best because as I said I wanted to become a solo artist. However, going through that process helped me to grow and it definitely benefitted me. I discovered with time that I like to fly alone. I am very headstrong and determined [Laughs out loud].

P.T. [Chuckles]. I am not surprised to hear that because when you made it big at the end of the 80s, I was a teenager at the time. I did not see you as someone who could be my

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older sister. Not, because you looked old, but because you appeared so confident and determined with your head on your shoulders. You transcended age. You were really focused and knew where you were going. In addition, you achieved a level of success that very few people will achieve in their lifetime. So, you definitely looked mature beyond your age.

K.W. It is interesting to hear that! You know, growing up in Los Angeles (the capital of the entertainment industry) you need to be strong, given that the competition is so fierce. As a woman in show business, a certain level of toughness is required to make it!

P.T. Looking back, are there things you would have done differently? In other words, if you could talk to your eighteen-year-old self, what advice would you give regarding the entertainment industry and beyond?

K.W. I would tell myself to appreciate your blessings and success, there are no guarantees to any of this, so you have to smell the roses and be grateful for all the opportunities that present itself.

P.T. There are other people who are talented and they will never get recognition.

K.W. Definitely! Nothing is guaranteed. A successful entertainer is blessed. However, I feel if you are doing something you love to do and it brings you joy... that is success. I can add that I would tell my younger self not to take the recognition for granted. I would hold myself more accountable through my actions. I would not let anyone such as the world or the business to get me off track, and not be deterred from the bigger goal. I would say to my younger self: "bless and heal people through your music. You have a gift and use it rightfully." I believe that I have a responsibility as an entertainer. Moreover, I learned that nothing can replace your family. So, I would say to my younger self: "Put everything in a proper order. Family should not be compared to what you do as a career. A family is always a blessing and should be above all else. Whereas a career is a gift that will never replace your family".

About success, I learned that when you get everything young and fast, you do not grasp things as a whole yet. It is human nature; you do not have the maturity or experience because the results of your work come so fast that you think if it happened because you must be great.

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P.T. [Laughs]

K.W. [Chuckles]. I was not arrogant or anything like that, but at that age, you think it is natural to be successful and you might even take it for granted. You believe the success will be permanent. So, if I could go back, I would say to myself: "Appreciate everything and slow down. Your maturity has to catch up to your gift".



P.T. I do not believe in individual success but I think you can give yourself credits for your achievement. I can tell that you are well-read and self-taught. These are important qualities to make it in any field. There are college people who cannot express themselves like you and who do not adopt a lifelong learning process after they graduate. In other words, they stagnate.

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K.W. Well, I was reading the other day and I saw a quote that said: "If you are not growing you are dying. We should strive to learn something new daily".

P.T. You make me think of [Pebbles](#) . She also achieved an unbelievable level of professional success without a privileged background and even if she became a mother at a very young age. I think it is very impressive.

K.W. I also admire Pebbles. We were in the same era so I know what you are talking about. She was amazing, not only beautiful and talented but also business savvy. She owned her own label, and had huge success, she inspired me.

P.T. Were there any particular obstacles you had to face, especially before your successful career, as an African-American female in the entertainment industry? If so, how did you overcome them? Do you think that who you know is as important as the talent in this business?

K.W. Thankfully No! I can say I was really blessed and I believe I had spiritual protection with a safety net around me. I really did not have to face these obstacles. In addition, I did not take drugs and alcohol, nor sleep around, both of which could have derailed my path. My parents were very supportive for what I wanted to achieve in my life. It's not what you know but who you know. I had Don Cornelius as a mentor. Having someone like him with a wealth of knowledge, wisdom and experience in this industry definitely helped me avoid certain pitfalls. But again, there is no guarantee. I was with Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, one of the most successful producers in the business, but I did not achieve continuity in my success like [Janet Jackson](#) for instance, who had the same mentors. So, the individual can be as much as important as the team. Success is a combination of many factors and there is no one recipe to achieve it nor again any guarantee. In my case, I think performing is my biggest asset.

P.T. I also believe the music business can be very volatile and ephemeral. One day you can be hot and the next a has-been.

K.W. True! Also, after my first album I did fewer tours. I got married, so things slowed down. I should have toured more but I did not.

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P.T. Before you made it in show business, you probably met naysayers. How did you deal with this to make sure it would not derail your road to success?

K.W. I didn't have people in my life like that. My family and friends support me with my talent. Besides, if I did have that I was unaware due to my laser sharp focus. I was commitment 1000% to my pursuit to become a star. I didn't look to the left or right only straight ahead. Early in my life, people knew I would make it because they saw I was someone who took initiative. In elementary school, I became a somewhat of a promoter at one point. I arranged dance and singing groups. We would perform for all the school functions. I was not shy at all and very early in my life it felt natural to be in front of an audience. My neighborhood and community had confidence in me because they noticed and knew about my focus. I was valedictorian in elementary school and voted most likely to succeed in high school.

P.T. Some aspiring artists get a bad record deal. Others record an album which receives poor marketing or was never released, etc. What advice do you have for artists to avoid these traps? Furthermore, what is your opinion about the 360 deal?

K.W. I think now it is possible to launch yourself, and you are less dependent on other people. A record label might offer distribution. Everybody has access to social media. Young people have a freedom of creativity that I did not have when I started. The landscape has become totally different. I also believe that they have more tools. They can create their own brand and market themselves. There are no middle men like before. I do not feel comfortable with the 360 because I do not like the idea of sharing all aspects of my artistry. It is like putting all your eggs in the same basket. I do not think it is safe because it can allow people to have too much control over your career as a whole. I understand that some artists feel they need to do it but I would not take that road. I have already made a name for myself, so my situation is different from someone who is just starting in the industry, for example. I still think that newcomers should not jump at the first offer that comes along. They can have the freedom to shop and assess what is out there. It is wise to get advice from experienced people including reputable experts in law entertainment. It is possible to start slow with one step at the time. For instance, newcomers can begin with a distribution deal. It is important to add that the 360 deal became an alternative in the industry given that in the beginning of this century, music labels made much less money and artists had to find other sources of revenues.

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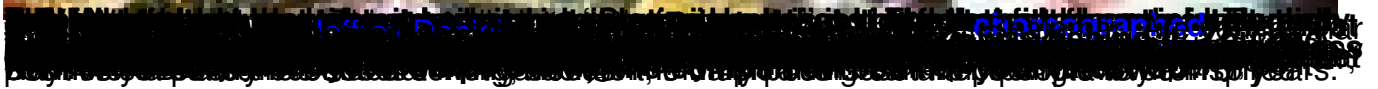
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The Freaky Phreaks' unbreakable code was the only one of its kind. The Freaky Phreaks' unbreakable code was the only one of its kind.