

# The Making of a Bold Soul Sister

**DJ Soul Sister makes groove waves over the airwaves**

By *Kimmie Tubre*

What follows below is a story about a formerly shy girl from Uptown who found her voice and her fame through presenting recorded music.

Born in the Carrollton 17th Ward neighborhood of New Orleans, Melissa A. Weber was admittedly a shy and introverted kid. However, her destiny was already showing signs of what was to come as music became a dominant part of her life from an early age and she began the long-term transformation into her current identity as the widely renowned DJ Soul Sister.

“My dad wanted me to know how to play a variety of instruments,” Melissa began, recalling an early photo of her sitting behind a kiddie drum set. “I was about 5 or 6 years old in the picture,” she added.

Following her father's wishes, Melissa dabbled in a wide selection of instruments. She played violin, organ, keyboard and spent several years learning the piano. When she got older, she began to teach herself the bass guitar.

“I come from a very musical family, especially on my father's side,” she said, noting that her half-sister, Valerie George, was the only woman from New Orleans to have had a recording contract with Motown Records. It was a normal event to see her father purchasing music from the local record stores. “I treasure those moments because they created my love for records,” she fondly

recalled. “It inspired me to collect my own records. I started collecting vinyl records at the age of 6,” she said.

While music has always been a part of her life, she learned early that the idea of strict practice and control did not suit her love for the musical art form. Melissa explained that she had more fun playing songs by ear and discovered a natural talent for rhythm and sounds.

“As early as I can remember, I wanted to do my own thing,” she said.

Doing her own thing set the pace for the rest of her life and led to her current DJ artist style.

“The truth is I never grew up saying that I wanted to be a DJ. That was never a thought in my head at the time,” she said. One thing Melissa did know was that she loved everything about music: being around it, collecting records and LPs and always listening to the radio.

It wasn't until the 1988 debut of a show called “Yo! MTV Raps” when Melissa realized that she not only loved music but she wanted to be a part of it. She recalls a young man telling her that she resembled DJ Spinderella from the popular girls rap group,

PHOTO BY AVERY WHITE



## COVER STORY

Salt-N-Pepa. Only about 13 at the time, Melissa watched Spinderella spin and manipulate records and instantly became inspired by her talents.

The inspiration of that show prompted Melissa to ask her parents for a set of turntables while she was still in high school and her father went to Radio Shack and purchased her first set of them. "It was the very basic equipment but the type of turntables he bought were the wrong kind," she said. While her goal was to learn how to manipulate the records like Spinderella, she was a bit disappointed when she realized she couldn't do that on the set her father bought for her. "I had new turntables for listening in the house but I couldn't really practice on them at all," she added.

Melissa graduated from Cabrini High School in 1993. The following year she enrolled at Loyola University of New Orleans. At the time, Loyola had a small radio station, WLDC, with a weak signal that could only be heard on campus and perhaps a block or two away. It was there that she received her first radio training.

Eventually Melissa left Loyola and continued working with and around music. One of those gigs was at the Virgin Megastore in the French Quarter where she was "surrounded by music" and enjoying it.

During the mid-1990s, she started volunteering at WWOZ radio. The popular

community radio station is known for playing non-mainstream music, much of which is indigenous to New Orleans and Louisiana. "I loved what they did there," she said. "On WWOZ you get to hear music that isn't featured on commercial radio such as Afrobeat and roots reggae, rare funk and contemporary jazz." Growing up listening to '70s R&B and fusion jazz, Melissa started to experiment with other genres and discovered a deep appreciation for funk and disco.

But, while volunteering at 'OZ, Melissa never envisioned hosting her own show until it actually happened. After going on air in the mid to late 1990s, Melissa became the founder of the popular "Soul Power," the longest-running rare groove radio show in the U.S. That show also helped her coin the stage name "DJ Soul Sister" and one of her listeners gave her the nickname, "Queen of Rare Groove."

As her radio career began to draw attention, one of her close friends took notice.

"This friend of mine really enjoyed hearing my shows on 'OZ and was like, 'You need to do that live.'" The newly-christened Soul Sister was hesitant at first but her friend, Sarah Fritz, a bartender in downtown New Orleans was insistent and arranged for her to do a deejay gig at the bar where she worked. It was in 1997 when Melissa, as DJ Soul Sister, performed her first show "On the One Wednesday." From that point on she

began performing sets elsewhere in the city and became very much in demand.

Renowned for her fantastic parties, DJ Soul Sister has been written up in several publications and has presented at lectures, film presentations and panel discussions. She has also worked with some big names, including George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic a number of times.

However, while her father encouraged her in her music career, she was emphatic about crediting her mother for

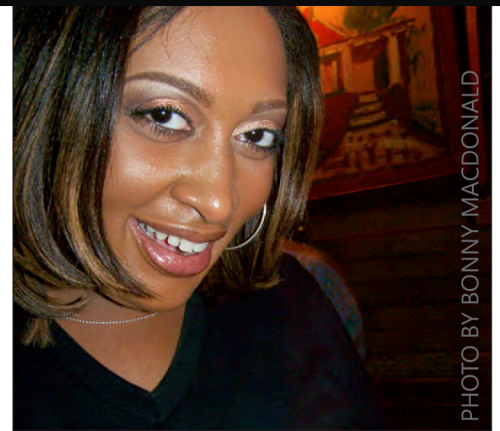


PHOTO BY BONNY MACDONALD

stressing an academic education, which Melissa believes in as strongly as the power of music.

And so, in 2000, after taking some time off from her higher education, she earned her B.A. degree in Communications from the University of New Orleans with a minor in English writing. Nineteen years later, while working on her Master's degree program in musicology at Tulane University, she was hired as curator of the Hogan Jazz Archive of Tulane University Special Collections, succeeding the highly respected jazz authority, Bruce Raeburn, who retired after 30 years.

Through all of her accomplishments, she remains a veteran radio programmer on WWOZ for the past 25 years. When you attend a DJ Soul Sister show the music you're hearing is strictly vinyl from her personal collection. No computer-generated music is played and requests are not taken. She sticks to her own playlist and that's what has kept her popular for so long.

DJ Soul Sister is not only one of the top deejays in the city, but she is also a unique entity whose style has been unmatched over time. Self-taught, she offers advice to those who hope to follow her into the musical presenter profession.

"Despite how I got here, I always encourage others to practice and put in the time and work," she advises, offering living proof that passion for what one loves can produce a longstanding career.

*You can tune in to DJ Soul Sister weekly from 8-10 p.m. Saturdays on WWOZ, 90.7 FM. Live events will resume after the Covid-19 quarantine has ended.* ♪

